

# The Dragon Conqueror

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Category: How to Train Your Dragon, Hunger Games

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Hiccup

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-11-30 23:58:06

Updated: 2013-03-09 05:25:23

Packaged: 2016-04-26 14:07:49

Rating: T

Chapters: 41

Words: 149,333

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Alvin has taken the offensive, and he won't stop until he has Hiccup in his clutches. With the help of a brother tribe, Stoick will protect his son. But when Hiccup falls for the cheif's daughter, he'll have to work even harder to protect everything and everyone he holds dear in the world. He'll have to choose between Love and Survival. If not, the consequences will be horrifying.

## 1. Chapter 1

Falling. Free falling. Into the open air. The wind searing through my hair, the smell of the sea infecting my nose. I can almost clap the wind into my hand, but it disappears like mist. I open my eyes and call to him. He swoops under me in a second, and I clasp my prostatic leg into place.

"Good catch bud." I say. He responds with a deep guttural reply.

Then with one flap of his wings, we're immediately higher and flying into the clouds. I look all around as Toothless rides the wind. Soon the island of Berk comes into view. My village. My home. I can just make out a few dragons flying around the animal farm. Toothless and I fly back home. I would fly with him all day. If it weren't for my new job at the Dragon Academy, and the fact that we have a new neighbor arriving.

Personally, I don't really see why anyone would want to move here. Berk is obviously no safe haven. But with the recent change in how we live, people have learned to cooperate, better. With dragons living amongst us, things have been changing. For the better to everyone.

Toothless swoops down and we smoothly land on the stone steps of my house. I run my fingers through my hair in an attempt to make it look less messy, but since Toothless woke me up at the crack of dawn to go

flying, I really couldn't care less. But when I see Stoick er, uh Dad, leave the house, my laziness is crushed like an eggshell.

"Hiccup, what are you doing? You need to look presentable for our new guests." He tells me in his chief voice.

Guests? They're going to be staying here. Forever. Not like they're going to leave. If they were only that lucky.

"Sorry dad." I say. "Toothless woke me up, and I didn't have time to brush my hair."

"Well go fix yourself up then meet me at the docks for the village greeting." Then with a rough pat on my shoulder, he leaves to go and ready the other Vikings at the docks.

I rub my shoulder in an attempt to ease the pain. My dad never knew how strong he was around me. Compare his giant boulder muscles to my toothpick arms, I'm surprised he hasn't broken me in half yet. Nonetheless, I head inside and wash up. A tub of warm water waits for me. I strip, and step into the glasslike water.

I scrub the dirt and sweat from flying from my hair, my body and my mouth. Bright pink and tingly, I head upstairs to find something clean to wear. To my surprise, my Dad has laid out one of his old shirts on my bed. A pale white thing with long sleeves. It must've been from when he was no older than a toddler since, back then when he was my age, his clothes would look enormous on me.

I feel rather stupid wearing the clothes of a toddler, but I am appreciative. This is something special. His clothes from his past are very precious to him. It takes half an hour to comb out my hair, and once I pull on my boot, I catch a glimpse of myself in the reflection of the shield hanging on the wall. I will admit, I look better than I normally do, but nothing like myself. I walk out and find Toothless resting in the grass. Then his head perks up and I mount on his back and we're off to the docks.

We arrive at the docks in a matter of minutes. Toothless makes a quick, spiral descent onto the pier. I hop off and search for my dad. I run into Fishlegs in the midst. He seems overflowing with giddiness.

"Isn't this awesome?! We're going to have a new member of the Dragon Academy!" he says excited.

"A new member?" I ask with a puzzled look. Recently, we've made it an official rule of the Dragon Academy, that you have to be at least thirteen before you can enroll and begin to learn how to ride.

"Yeah, the new member has a daughter! And she's our age!" Fishlegs explains.

Suddenly Snotlout shoves him out of the way. "And don't even think about saying 'hi' to her. She's mine." He says with a wide cockiness.

I roll my eyes. "I really have no choice Snotlout. I am the son of

the chief. Saying 'Hi' to new villagers is an obligation."

"Oh whatever. Not like you'll stand a chance." He says then walks away.

\_Will she even be attractive?\_ I think. I hear footsteps behind me and see Astrid walk up to me. She brushes her bangs out of her eye.

"It'll be nice to finally have another girl in the group to talk to." She says.

"Well what about Ruffnut?" I ask. Then I look over to her with Tuffnut, and the two are punching each other for no apparent reason.

"Yeah never mind. But what will you guys even talk about? Plus, who knows, she could even be a spoiled brat." I say. It's no secret that Astrid's a strong and confident girl. But could you blame me for being curious? She's not the gossipy kind, and talking about clothes bore her to tears. She seems more like the kind of person who finds chucking axes at trees for hours on end, fun. But you have to admire her for her independent spirit.

"Don't jump to conclusions Hiccup. You never know what people are like. We never knew what you were like." She retorts. For some stupid reason, I slightly blush at her compliment. Or as close to a compliment as I'll ever get from Astrid. And yet she's right. I haven't even met the girl and already I'm making assumptions about her. And as for Astrid, she seems more open to this than I am. She's usually so guarded around people, and yet she's willing to welcome this new girl with open arms. If she's willing to have a better attitude, I should too.

Things with Astrid have been, I guess you could say complicated. We're not really a couple, and yet we still have small feelings for each other. My feelings for her have changed since the dragons came along. Even when she kissed me, we were never officially a couple. Then with the new Dragon Academy open, I pretty much forgot about my feelings for her. Or more rather put them aside. I'm still not sure how I feel about her, really.

I find my dad at the edge of the pier where the boat will dock. I head over and am joined by Gobber, who in retrospect is like a second guardian to me. I've been his apprentice since I was a young child. He taught me everything I know now and the even taught me the knowledge on how to make Toothless' tale. He's one of the few people I can go to for help, let alone trust. While he may seem cruel and heartless, but really, he just tells things like it is. No beating around the bush for him, although he could use a filter.

I meet up with my dad and he takes a minute to look at me. Like he's just seeing me for the first time. Seeing his shirt on me must bring back old memories I assume. I can tell from the look on his face. He has a gentle smile on his face which almost no one ever sees.

"You look great son. Like a real man." He says.

"Thanks dad." I answer.

Since our war with the dragons has ebbed, I've been trying hard to mend my relationship with my dad. Same goes for him to me. He's been asking me to do more things with him around the village instead of brushing me aside. Letting me handle the Dragon Academy alone. Returning each other's hugs instead of awkwardly tolerating them. And my brush with death about a year ago - after defeating the Green Death" made us both realize how we needed to stop pushing each other away for some things we couldn't help, specifically the crushing of our relationship that happened after my mother's death. Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them.

Like me, for instance. Right now.

I can see the boat sailing in the horizon, and I begin to get nervous. Which I don't know why since with one look at me people use to think that I was nothing, or just ignore me. Which I liked, because then I had time to myself. But now that the word has spread that I am now a village hero, my solitude time, or flying time with Toothless has been deprived. Berk is a small island in the middle of nowhere. So whenever something new comes around, we tend to go a little overboard.

As the boat pulls in, the first person I see, or more rather the only person I see is the new girl's dad since he's the same size as my dad. Big and bulk with a thick brown beard and a thick accent to go with it. He basically had the same outfit as my dad, so I'm guessing he is, or was chief of his own tribe. The gods only know what could've possibly happened for the Chief to leave his own village.

I'm so lost in my own observation of him that when my father' booming voice vocalizes, I jump a little.

"Great thunder of Thor, Boggs! It's great to see 'ye!" my father shouts with excitement.

"Oh it's great to see you too Stoick after so many years!" Chief Boggs retorts.

"You remember Hiccup don't you?" my father says. And he gestures a hand to me.

"Of course I do. But he looks older since the last time I saw him." he says. Notice he didn't say stronger or taller like most people would say when they see the child of an old friend. He gives my hand a strong and rather hurtful shake with his sausage fingers. "And your kid reminds me, I need you to see my daughter!" he booms.

"Little Skullette?! Why I haven't seen her since she was a wee lass!" my father says.

Skullette, huh? Well it's not the worst name I've heard. Fact I think it's the best name I've heard for a young Viking girl. The down side? She sounds pretty tough. Great another Astrid. Of course not that Astrid is too tough, well yeah she is, but in a good way. I mean tough like, mean, rude and a bully.

"Skullette! Come one lass! Let's meet the new neighbors!" Chief Boggs calls.

I'm preparing for the worst, but when I see her step out from behind her bulky father, my thoughts were completely wrong.

The creature standing before me has come from another world. Where every fiber of their body is designed off of something enticing. Because everything I point out, I automatically compare to the most beautiful things I can think of. Her exquisite emerald green eyes. Her skin fair and white. Her lips as red as a rose. And her long, wavy hair that's as black as a Night Fury's wings. Her outfit seems as if the blue had been picked personally from the night sky. She wears an off-shoulder shirt with a tight waist and sleeves that fall from the crook in her elbow down to her mid-thigh. Bounded by two straps on each forearm. The shirt ends with a belt that locks in the middle. Her skirt's the same as Astrid's, but blue. She wears bandage wraps on her arms and legs, and that's when I notice the bow slung over her shoulder. She completes the outfit with leg warmers and simple sandals. Her forehead has a root crown that swirls around and around her head.

She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

"Skullette, I'd like you to meet Stoick the Vast, and his son Hiccup." Chief Boggs says.

After Skullette shakes hands with my dad, she moves over to me, and I must have some stupid look on my face. Because when her beautiful eyes lay on my face, she lets out the cutest giggle I've ever heard. I want to turn my head away, because I felt like something this beautiful doesn't belong in such a glum and gray place. But not wanting to impose as rude, I look her straight in those eyes and say, "Nice to meet you."

"Hi, nice to meet you too." She says. Her voice was soft, a contrast from the loud and booming voice of her father. And I must've let out a stupid giggle since the next thing I know, I have everyone staring at me.

We release hands and while my father talks with Chief Boggs, Skullette and I stay behind them until we've cleared the docks. We don't talk much, but I don't think she minds. From the look on her face, it looks like she's taking in the scenery of her new home. Not very welcoming in my opinion.

She brushes some strands of her hair out of her face as her head peers from side to side. I also take notice that's she's about my height. Unlike most girls who're usually a little taller than me. When she finds me staring at her, I immediately blush and turn away, staring at my feet which have suddenly become very interesting.

I hear her giggle then I hear her ask, "So, in your opinion, what the best about Berk?"

I look up and see her face, "Uh, well, it snows nine months of the year, and hails the other three. Any food that grows here is tough and tasteless." I say.

"Well, that's not very pleasant." She says.

"Well, there is an upside, and that's the pets." I say, my mood

suddenly improving.

"Really?" she asks, quite intrigued.

"Yeah, while other places have ponies, or parrots, we have . .  
."

"Dragons!" she says, cutting me off. I was about to go on, but something in her tone sounded terrified.

I look up and I see her pupils have shrunk and she's turned whiter than her normal skin. I look over and I see she's staring at Toothless. She looks a little shaky, so I act fast.

"Oh no, no, no. It's okay. They're nice here." I say. I run over to Toothless and his head perks up as I approach. He purrs and snuggles his head against my hands as I scratch his scaly head. "This is Toothless."

Skullette just continues to stare, very hesitant about taking another step.

"A Night Fury?" she asks quietly.

"Uh, yeah. Toothless, this is Skullette. Skullette, Toothless."

At first they seem willing to greet, but as expected, as Toothless inches forward, he suddenly steps back, but doesn't grimace like he did with me and Astrid for our first meeting. He's hesitant, and I know it's because of Skullette's bow. I didn't see her lug a sheath of arrows off the boat, and the bow's pretty much useless without them. But I don't tell him to back off. Skullette stays in place, not really scared, but as if sizing Toothless up. Same goes for him to her. She stares at him, knowing he's unpredictable.

Instead of pulling off her weapon and leaving it to show she's not going to hurt him, she pulls the bow off her shoulder, and holds it in both her hands out in front of her. Toothless creeps up, cautiously, and just sniffs the bow. Once he knows it's not a threat, he quick to melt his remaining defenses against her and I see his pupils morph from slits to normal. Skullette slings the bow back over her shoulder and openly pets Toothless, scratching his head. I'm baffled as I hear Toothless purr.

"Wow, that went better than I expected. He's usually pretty guarded with strangers." I say.

"Stranger danger." She says with a giggle. "He's nice." She adds.

"You want to take a ride?" I ask.

"Uh, I-I rather not." She says suddenly backing off.

"You sure? It's a lot of fun." I persuade.

"I'm sure it is, but I just have a bit of a fear of heights." She admits.

"Oh, well we could just walk." I say.

"You sure?" she asks. The guilt I see in her face moves my decision.

"Yeah, sure! No problem, and I can give you a tour of the island. Including a tour of the Dragon Academy." I say.

"You have a Dragon Academy?" she asks shocked and interested.

"Yep, and . . . oh! I almost forgot, you should meet the other stu-" Suddenly I'm shoved out of the way completely by Snotlout.

"Well hello there my lady. I'm Snotlout. Try to relax." He says. I see her roll her eyes and when Snotlout tries to kiss her hand, she coldly yanks it away.

I shove him away and lead her down the line. "And now that that's done, this is Fishlegs," she exchanges a friendly handshake. "The twins Ruffnut and Tuffnut," they're too busy still punching each other to give a proper hello. "And this is Astrid."

They give each a handshake and a hello. "Welcome to the group." Astrid says.

"Nice to know there's at least one normal person I can talk to. Well aside from you Hiccup." Skullette replies. My face feels warm.

"So, why don't we help you get settled into your new home?" I suggest.

Everyone agrees and each, along with the dragons, help carry Skullette and her father's things to their new house that I just now realized is right next to ours. And actually, I'm happy about it. More than happy, ecstatic even. Knowing Skullette's right next door gives me shivers. But not the kind from cold weather, the kind that you get when you overly excited.

I don't know what it is, but with Skullette here, Berk just felt a little more like home.

## 2. Chapter 2

After changing back into my normal clothes, I head over to Skullette's house to help her unpack. Skullette's house was very similar to mine. Basic living room and a single wooden staircase to get to the second floor.

Much like mine, her room was upstairs. It was much bigger than mine since it didn't have a bed for a dragon, but still nice. As Astrid and I are helping unload all her things, Skullette was outside with her dad. As we're unpacking, I managed to find several sheaths of arrows. After unloading them all, I find she had a total of four sheaths, giving a total of forty-eight arrows.

"She must be some hunter." I comment.

"No kidding. Check this out." Astrid says.

I turn and see that she's found at least three bows. Perfectly carved

and preserved and yet you could tell they were well used. I couldn't help but feel that these were only a small portion of others she might have stowed away. We hear Skullette walking up the stairs with a couple more trunks. They were pretty huge. You could at least fit three of me in them.

"Sheesh Skullette, don't you think you have enough?" I tease.

She laughs and my cheeks get warm again. "Don't worry; this is the last of them. And these are the essentials." She says.

She opens the trunk, and inside is the widest variety of bows, arrows, sheaths and quivers I've ever seen. Bow's made of wood and metal and plastic and materials I can't even name. Arrows with feathers cut into flawless uniform lines. I've never seen such an inventory, even at Gobber's shop.

"I'm guessing you like hunting?" I ask rhetorically.

"Totally. I've been hunting since I was, about eleven." She says.

My eyes widen with astonishment, and yet out of my peripherals, I can just make out Astrid rolling her eyes.

"Want to try one?" Skullette asks.

"Sure!" I say.

She hands me a stunning wooden recurve bow. Its limbs were black with a brown middle. It featured a crowned, cut-past-center arrow shelf with a bear hair mat and a leather side plate. Matched hardwood laminates give this bow a truly handsome look. It's a lot lighter than I anticipated. I hold it up and line my vision.

"Oh man I would love to take this for a spin." I say.

"You want to?" she asks.

I'm hesitant for a moment since Gobber told me how I can't handle weapons. \_You can't life a hammer, you can't swing an axe\_ I remember. Then again, he said nothing about archery. And if I can at least hold this bow, maybe I could shoot too. Also the look on Skullette's face shows me she's just dying to go into the woods.

"Yeah sure. We've got plenty of time." I say. Then as she's prepping two sheaths, I hear Astrid say something.

"Wha-what? Sorry Astrid I didn't hear you." I say.

"I said, don't be late for the Dragon Academy. Remember it starts at noon." She reminds me. I nod, but something had me on edge. The tone of her voice, she sounded irritated. But before I can even ask her what's wrong, she turns and leaves.

I turn back to Skullette who's all set with her sheath of arrows. She hands me her second pack and I sling it over my shoulder. It's a little heavy, but not like it's holding me down. More like carrying one of my wicker baskets. We head outside, and I find Toothless waiting, lying on the grass as a green-blue butterfly flies over his



head. His head cocks in our direction, and as I'm walking toward him, I find his attention diverted. I turn and find Skullette standing back, still pretty uncomfortable.

"Uh, looks like we're gonna walk today, bud." I say. Skullette rubs her arm out of feeling guilty since it's obvious I like to ride a lot. "No really it's okay. Right bud?" Toothless replies with a rather pleasant sounding bellow.

Once Skullette's shoulders relax, we make our way to the woods. Skullette leads the way while I trail close behind her and Toothless not far behind me. Once we're in the shelter of the trees, I can just see her relax fully. To the point where all her cares just get thrown into the wind. She pauses for a brief minute, and just drops her head back to bask in the sunlight. Rays break through the canopy of trees, and the way they dance on her skin, simply entrancing. I'm rather on edge though, even with the protection of the bow and arrows and Toothless.

Naturally, the animals on Berk stay out of the village unless we heard them in. But inside the woods, they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow. The only real path I know is the path to get to the Cove, and that was only because I was visiting Toothless daily, about a year ago. Other than that, I have no real reason to go to the woods. Usually Mulch and Bucket catch everything for us. But there's also food if you know how to find it. And Skullette sure does know how.

I watch as she naturally loads an arrow in her bow and lightly stalks through the foliage. She would tend to look at Toothless and I, as we would tend to crack dry twigs and leaves along the ground. But she needs to remember that we're not used to hunting, so she lets us off easy.

Once I see her relax, and walk lazily, I then ask, "I'm guessing you've done this before?"

"Yep, since I was eleven, like I said." He reminds me.

"Do you mind if I ask why?" she cocks her head toward me, obviously puzzled. "I mean, you're the daughter of the Chief. I just thought that naturally, everyone else gives you the food. You know? Like you never would need to go to the woods."

"Well, that's true, but my dad wanted me to learn how to fight. He wanted to make sure I would always be able to protect myself." She says.

"Smart guy."

"Bet you thought I was kind of, prissy?" she teases.

"No, no, no. Not at all." I admit. "In fact the exact opposite."

We share a laugh, then let the conversation drop. We then go on and ravage through the woods. Or more rather I watched Skullette as she hunts. It's very interesting to watch her hunt. It's eerie how little sound she makes, even when the leaves have fallen and it's a challenge to move at all without chasing off the game. We keep going in deeper and soon the rocks eventually turn to pebbles, and then, to

my relief, we're back on pine needles and the gentle incline of the forest floor. I soon realize we have a problem.

Navigating the rocky terrain with little to no experience " well, you're naturally going to make some noise. But even on the smooth bed of pine needles, Toothless and I are loud. And I mean \_loud\_ loud, as if we're stomping our feet or something. I feel terrible, and yet Skullette doesn't tell us anything. I'm not even sure if she plans on hunting anything today. She just got here. As we prowl through the trees, I let her get twenty, maybe thirty yards of space from me and Toothless.

She ducks behind a tree, and ever so slightly turns her head. I look in her same direction, and I find out she's adjacent to a wild boar. I sink down behind some bushes and watch through the leaves as Skullette pulls back her bowstring. My eyes home in on the wild boar, and within a split second, the arrow shoots him through the heart. I jump a little, but then stand there astonished. She had managed to take down a boar with one arrow, one shot, and not even needing a knife.

As she's removing the arrow, I come up behind her and say, "That was amazing!"

"Thanks." She says with a smile.

"You've got to teach me how to do that." I beckon.

"I'd love to. It's really fun, and I guess you could say it gives you that sense of independence." She says.

With that said, she leads me deeper into the woods. It's weird having her lead me even though I'm the one who's lived here for years and yet have never made even the slightest attempt at venturing into the woods. Feeling like I'm mooching off of her, I felt compelled to give her something in return. Probably not cash, but maybe knowledge. I certainly know how to fish well, and I can teach her how to build certain things, but that all depends on her interests. Weaponry is a definite option. I bring this to her attention, and she agrees something can be worked out.

Over the next hour, I spend it with Skullette as we talk hunting and constructing. She teaches me the basics of hunting, and when I manage to kill my first squirrel, the poor thing is mostly a charred mess because it took a direct hit to the body. But she shows me how to skin and clean it " which wasn't my strongest point since I kept gagging and even felt like I would vomit at any moment. But she tells me with a little practice, I'll get it.

In exchange for one hour of archery/hunting lessons, I give her an hour of fishing tactics, snare trapping, and plant recognition. I even took her to one my hidden places that are blossoming with wild plums and berries. Toothless kept himself occupied by chasing around any birds or butterflies that crossed his path.

It's about late afternoon when we finally materialize from the woods. By then we have three gallons of mixed berries, about three squirrels " not including my badly shot on " and at least two rabbits that I managed to snag in my snares, along with the wild boar Skullette shot. We keep them all in separate burlap sacks except for the boar

which we tied to a tree branch Toothless had snapped off. This is one my best hauls for my first hunting trip, and I feel very proud. Not to mention ecstatic when my father hears about me hunting.

It's not something I normally do, and the thought of his possible reaction makes me lightheaded with giddiness. But when we walk into my house to divide up the haul, my thoughts are crushed. Inside waiting for us was: my dad, Gobber, Chief Boggs, and, Astrid? Something felt wrong. I turn to Skullette who's as oblivious to everything as I am.

"Hello son," my dad begins, and immediately I know I'm in for a lecture.

"Hey dad, is everything okay?" Skullette and I drop out gatherings as we walk forward.

"Not really, son. Do you remember your other duties of the day? Besides welcoming Skullette to our island?" my dad asks. I can almost interpret the rhetorical tone in his voice.

\_Bam!\_ It's like someone has punched me in the stomach. Of course no one has, but the pain of it is so real, I need to take a step back. I forgot about the Dragon Academy! \_Oh gods!\_ I panic to myself. "Dad I'm so sorry. I-I didn't mean to forget, I-I just lost track of time and-" he stops me by holding up his hand in a gesture to stop. I swallow hard.

"Look son, I know you're not one to forget things like the Dragon Academy, so I'm letting you off with a warning. But you need to remember other important things in your life. Like your job as a trainer." He explains.

"Yes dad." I say. It feels like I'm a child again, and he's correcting me like the way he did when he used to take me fishing.

"Good. Now, what do you two have here?" he motions to the haul behind Skullette's ankle.

"It's the reason why we're late." Skullette says. She brings forward the burlap sacks and dumps our catches on our wooden table. Gobber's and my dad's eyes widen at the catches. Then when Toothless helps Skullette bring in the wild boar, their mouths agape.

"You two caught these?" My dad asks astonished.

"Well Skullette shot the boar and a couple of the squirrels, I just caught the rabbits and harvested the berries." I say.

"Well this certainly is quite the gathering son. Great job!" my dad says with a hard punch on my arm that sends me stumbling back into Skullette. She catches me and helps me gain my balance. While they both talk over the catches, Skullette talks with her dad. Leaving me to talk to Astrid, who still won't let go of the disappointed and angry look on her face.

"Look Astrid, I'm sorry I forgot okay? But it's not like it's the end of the world." I say.

"Maybe for you, Lover Boy. But for me, it was like managing hell without you." She says, trying her best not to scream and rip me apart.

"I'm sorry. But look it was a onetime thing, it won't happen again." I promise. The oddity of this talk dawns on me. It's almost as if I should've been saying this to my dad rather than Astrid.

"Just remember how to keep business, and pleasure separate." She says in a sour tone. Then he leaves, not forgetting to bump my shoulder just to show how mad she is with me.

Pleasure? What pleasure could I possibly have? And what was with that 'Lover Boy' comment? Is it really that obvious I had feelings for Skullette? But I don't even know if they're real, or just a crush. We literally just met hours ago, and already she's making assumptions?

What happened to the "Don't be so quick to judge?" quote she told me? Not to mention the fact that she helped in unpacking Skullette's things. Now she's being distant. I'm sure she's making everything more dramatic than it needs to be. Could it be possible she's just jealous? No. Not Astrid. She's never jealous of anyone. Then again, these are different times now, and back when we were fighting dragons, she was so focused on that that she didn't care what people did. Now, with me being the head of the Dragon Academy, it's almost like she still is focused, but she needs me there to help.

My thoughts become so overwhelming that I excuse myself to my room. I plop on my bed and cover my face with my hands. I hear Toothless walk up the steps not long after me. I feel his breath on my face and when I uncover my face, I'm staring into his green eye. He gives a concerned purr, but I simply pet his head and assure him I'm okay. I hear more footsteps bounding the stairs, and Skullette appears.

"Hey Hiccup. Everything okay?" she asks.

I rub my temples then shift to a sitting position, cross-legged. "Yeah, just a lot of things suddenly going on." I say.

"Yeah I could tell. Your girlfriend seemed upset you missed the Academy." She says. I look to her and her face shows she's being genuine rather than teasing me.

"Oh no, no, no. She's not my girlfriend. Far from it actually." I say.

"Oh, sorry. It just seems like you two were together." She retorts.

"Nope." I say.

"Well I should probably get going." She says.

"Uh, actually wait, Skullette. Uh, why don't I show you around the village? Maybe you could meet some local butchers who would like your rabbits and squirrels." I say.

She turns to me and after she briefly debates in her head, she smiles and says she would love to. We leave the house once again, leaving

Gobber and my dad with the haul. Chief Boggs had already left. We reach the Plaza in less than a minute, and I show her all of the little shops and houses we had. I even took her to see Gobber's shop, which had recently been transformed into a dental shop for the dragons. As we're walking, a sudden cold chill runs up my spine. I turn and find Mildew walking toward us.

"Well, hello there Skullette. What a pleasure meeting you. I am Mildew" He says. His voice gives me chills, and the way he says her name. It sounds as if he's getting ready to eat her. What's even worse is his stench. I look behind him and find his sheep Fungus.

"Nice to meet you too." Skullette says, trying to be polite. Although it's clear she has no interest at all in even talking to Mildew. Her instincts are good.

"Just thought I'd say welcome to the island." He says.

"And thank you Mildew. I'm sure we appreciate it." I interrupt. Then I pull Skullette away, afraid she might choke on his foul odor. Or at least I will.

We manage to get out of hearing range before she comments, "Well that was unusual."

"Tell me about it. He's never the meet-and-greet type. I don't think I need to tell you to stay away from him." I say.

"Definitely no need. But who is he?" she asks.

"He's basically the most annoying old man on the island. He'll try and do anything in his power to drive the dragons away. And since he's a village elder, he's basically using that as a shield to avoid any kind of punishment." I say.

"Has he done some things before?"

"Oh plenty. But he only paid for one out of all of it." I bitterly remember.

"Sheesh. I bet you would like to give him the worst punishment there is." She assumes.

If it were up to me, I would NEVER give Mildew any form of justice. I would honestly just sentence him to death for everything he's done. And I would do it too. No one would protest against me. But it is of the highest treason if you kill a village elder here on Berk. That's where his protection comes in. But almost no one likes him, and I'm sure everyone wants him dead. And as much as I want to admit this, I keep it to myself.

As we're walking through the village, I see Skullette's head turning from side to side to take a look at all of the dragons and people. As we make our way towards the Academy, we keep up a conversation about hunting and training the dragons. We make our way to the Animal Farm, and we find a Monstrous Nightmare and a Deadly Nadder outside the fence of the sheep pen. Suddenly, there's a shift. I look all around and find no one. I feel a strange suspicion crawl up my spine. I manage to find Mulch leaving with Bucket.

"Hey Mulch, what's going on? Why aren't there any animals out?" I ask him.

"We locked them all in their stables. Your father has called for an urgent meeting at the Great Hall. He also wants you there." He says.

"Well, I guess we're going to the Great Hall next." I joke to Skullette.

We rush with the crowd toward the hall. There's a slight commotion as the crowd surges to the left. We find Astrid and the others along the run and once we walk through the gigantic double doors, we try to find our seats outside of the crowd. I pull up a chair for Astrid and Skullette, and as I'm about to sit, Gobber finds me and tells me to head up front with my dad. My mind is racing a mile a minute. Nonetheless I head up and I find my father, relieved to see me. I take a seat next to him, and then lean forward and find Chief Boggs sitting next to my dad. Gobber to my right, and I can see Skullette and the others in the back.

"Alright, let's get started." My father says. His voice echoing all along the walls. The acoustics in here are amazing. "Now the reason why I called you all here is because we're dealing with yet another, Outcast problem." The crowd gasps and murmurs. "Now, now, let me finish. Alvin has recently sent us an ominous letter, saying he wants Hiccup." My heart sinks immediately into my stomach like a rock. "And he says, if we don't give him up, then he'll invade the island, and take him by force."

I can almost see the battle against Alvin and his army right in front of me. Punches thrown, swords clash, dragons setting the beach ablaze. My mind goes straight to Toothless, Astrid, Skullette, Gobber, my dad. I'm definitely not afraid of Alvin, but I am afraid of putting the people I care about in danger. Risking their lives just to protect me.

I can feel Toothless nudge my arm, then my father's hand rest on my shoulder. I know I'm probably pale white, but I still listen as my father goes on. "But we are not going to let that happen." His voice was directed to me to give me reassurance, and promise.

But my heart is racing, and I'm suddenly searching for a way out; feeling so suffocated even in the twenty-foot tall and thirty-foot wide hall. I know if I run out I'll appear cowardly. But after defeating the Green Death, facing Alvin at least twice, and finding a long lost treasure that not even my dad could find, I've definitely proven myself.

But still there are those who think I'm still an embarrassment, and if I run out, I'll only prove them right. I will give no one the satisfaction. So I just stay put, and stare at the fire that always burns in the circular pit at the epicenter of the hall. Toothless licks my hand, vying for my attention. My fingers somehow find the will to scratch his ears, and I feel him take a seat next to me. His head resting in my lap. I actually find scratching him distracting, enough so that I can still listen to my dad, but occupy my thoughts.

Not many things register. My dad explains a war strategy, people debate on how to keep me protected. People just keep talking. Talking. Talking. Talking. My dad. Gobber. A couple other Vikings. The way they talk about Alvin. About me. As the double doors open, I can see that it's late afternoon. The sky becoming dark. Soon the talking becomes too much.

My body reacts before my mind and the next thing I know I'm outside. It was the best thing I could think of. There was the sound of someone calling my name, but I ignored them. Once I'm at the last stone step, I begin walking. Across lawns, past my home, and into the dark beyond. My movements are so robotic, and it feels like I'm in a daze. Like my body is still working, but my mind is blank. The summer's been scorching hot and dry as a bone. There's been no rain, leaving the plants with brittle leaves, building a crunchy carpet under my feet.

Where? Where to go? I don't want to go flying. The woods perhaps? I'm at the edge of the village before the sudden dangers of animals make me remember how trapped I am. I back away, turn on my heel, and take off again.

The next thing I know, I'm in my room at home and I'm curled up on Toothless' bed. It's still fairly warm from last night and the stone hold in heat. My escape has done nothing to subdue my rising hysteria. It feels like it'll drown unless I release it, but I don't know how. Alvin and the Outcasts. Not what I expected, but still a man of nightmares. Now I know the real reason why Chief Boggs is here, it's so that he and my dad and come up with strategies on keeping me safe.

I curl up on my side and stare unblinkingly at my headboard placed at the foot of my bed. My muscles relax, my heart rate slows. In the distance, there's someone calling my name. But at the moment, I excuse myself from thinking about even those I care most. I only think of me and what lies ahead.

I can just see the end of hope, the beginning of the destruction of everything I hold dear in the world.

When is Alvin going to give up? I've already beaten him twice. While his knowledge of warfare is impressive, I'll admit, he still hasn't beaten me yet. But he'll never stop until he has me. I never meant for anyone to be involved. He is our long-lost rival, and the history with him and my dad goes way back, but by me showing him that we can train dragons, he's now set his eyes on me. And in turn, I've endangered everyone I care about. I can't let Alvin hurt them. I could just hand myself over, but no one would ever forgive me.

And while his offer was given to me before, I just know that within time, I'll have a knife in my back. Literally. Unable to stand the confinement I soon feel, I get up and leave my home.

I walk through the village, which is now dark. Decorated by shadows and the light of the moon. It's about ten o'clock at night, and everyone's gone to bed. Any other houses give off a warm glow of life. Lit windows, smoke from the skylights, and it's boot night. Great. The last thing I wanted was to smell the stench of foot fungus.

But I walk through the village on silent feet, but suddenly I'm tackled to the gravel so harshly I'll be picking it out of my hair for a week. I look and find Toothless hovering over me and licking my face repeatedly.

"Hey, hey bud." I say. He nuzzles my cheek and once he lets up, I hop up and we ride around the entire village for hours.

When we get back home, my muscles are sore and stiff. I can tell from the smoke coming from the skylight that my dad's home. Not wanting to get into a lecture or conversation about my protection, I have Toothless land in the second skylight above my room and I jump off and land on my bed. Toothless, after setting his bed ablaze, settles down and rests his head. I pull my blanket over my body and blow out the candle next to my bed. I stare out at the sky for about another forty minutes before I even begin to drift off. Even when I do drift off, I'm taunted by horrific and graphic dreams that have never manifested before.

But now, everything screams in my dreams tonight.

### 3. Chapter 3

In the morning, I'm in no better condition than I was the night before. When I wake, I'm paralyzed with fear. My face moist with sweat and my heart racing. I sit up and find another blanket draped over my, still shaking body. My dad must've at least seen to know I was home.

I look all around my room and I find Toothless staring at me. Only then do I realize I'm breathing heavy. He comes up and licks my hand.

"I-it's okay bud. I just, had a bad dream." He snuggles close and I rest my cheek on his head. He purrs and I know he wants to go, but I'm just not in the mood. "I'm sorry bud, but I don't feel like flying today." He lifts his head and I watch his eyes cross to the middle, and his throat bob. Within a second, I have the head of a salmon in my lap. Still disgusting. "Uh, thanks bud, but I think I'll skip breakfast too."

I slip out of bed and after I've washed my face, I go back to my room and that's when I see it. The recurve bow from yesterday along with a full sheath of arrows, just sitting on my desk. I walk over and I find a note just sitting on the handle of the bow. It was from Skullette. She wanted to know if I can meet her today for hunting.

The bow's limbs were still fairly warm from the heat of the day, so she must've been here recently. Probably minutes before I woke up. I trace my fingers along the limbs of the bow. If I wasn't going to go flying, this would be the next best option. I take the sheath and the bow and after I grab one of my wicker baskets, I head outside.

My walk to the woods consumed a good ten minutes, but as I'm walking through the Plaza, I hear my name called. I turn and see Astrid running toward me. She wraps me in her arms before I even get the chance to react.



"Oh my gosh, Hiccup! I'm so glad you're okay!" she exclaims.

"Of course I am Astrid. Why wouldn't I be?" I ask.

"You left halfway through the meeting, and then no one could find you." She says.

\_Well, nice to know they were concerned\_ I think. Then she punches me in the arm. I rub my bicep for a second. Her punches were becoming less hurtful. Either because I'm growing stronger or more tolerable of them. Probably the second one.

"You scared me." she says.

"Really? I mean it's not like I ran out of the village." I joke.

"No. Not like that. But when you left, you looked really distraught. I wanted to make sure you're okay." She says.

I feel a small sensation of pleasure that she was worried for me, and I'm truly touched by her concern. "Don't worry Astrid, I'm fine. It was just really overwhelming. Which is still weird since we've faced Alvin before." I say.

She just gives me a smile. "Well, listen I've got to meet Skullette in the woods, so I'll catch you later." I say. And as I mention her name, Astrid's face changes. I act fast. "But how about we meet up later, and you can teach me how to throw an axe like you?" I suggest. This makes her feel a little better, and the truth is I do want to learn how she can throw like that.

With that settled, I turn and head into the woods. Once I'm a few yards in, I begin to remember the facts and steps Skullette taught me. I load an arrow and try my best to take light steps when I move. I move slowly and smoothly, making sure I watch where I step. Not cracking any twigs and avoiding moving any pebbles.

This is the one time I'm glad Toothless isn't with me.

This would be ten times harder. He'd scare any game off within a five mile radius. As I prowl through, I begin to test how I can run while still remaining allusive. I manage to kill a squirrel in the process. I'm still sticking to small game. Skullette and I both know I'm not ready to take down bigger game like that wild boar. To most people, it would take years to get to the level of expertise she's at since she's been hunting since age eleven, but with her as my teacher, I can gain enough experience and knowledge to be proclaimed as a professional within a few weeks.

I decide to head to the Cove since I don't know where else to go. I sling the bow over my shoulder and take my time in getting there. Once I arrive, I climb down the stone wall and nestle by the water's edge. I snag a few fish while I'm there before I begin thinking.

What am I going to do?

I know Alvin isn't as treacherous as he proclaims to be, but he's still a man of cruelty, violence, and unforgiving. While I should be

discouraged, it only makes me that more cautious of him. The more we win, the more he'll try to top himself. Then there's the matter of the army. I know Astrid will be dying to join.

She's certainly tough enough, she proved that long ago, and I know she'd be more than willing to protect me; but she only adds to my list of people I'm afraid I'll lose. I know I may act all cool and collected around Alvin, and my dad and the other Vikings are more than capable of defeating him, but really, I'm just as scared as everyone else. I just do a great job at hiding. Over the years, I've learned to turn my face into an unreadable mask so no one can read my thoughts.

The sudden crack of a twig startles me, and I jump up and load an arrow. Only to find Skullette, in her elegant beauty walking toward me. I withdraw my arrow.

"You scared me." I say.

"I know sorry. But good job at arming yourself. Nice to know you were paying attention." She replies.

"Of course."

She sits down next to me and I keep the bow at my side. We sit in silence as the bird's chirp. The sunlight reflecting off the water. For a while, we talk about the sketches I didn't even know she noticed in my bedroom. Turns out she's a bit of an artist as well. But she does clothes sketches, unlike my calculated ones depicting Toothless' speed. She says she's working on a new design for the soldiers to wear in combat. Her sketches combine both comfort and agility. So you can move swiftly and comfortably when in combat.

"So, how are you handling everything?" she finally asks. I know the question's been on her mind. I haven't seen anyone since I left the meeting at the Great Hall. Let alone talk to anyone.

"Better than what everyone expects I assume." I joke.

"Definitely. But are you really?" she asks.

"Uh, well, I'm definitely a little worried, but really I don't know if I should be. I mean, I've faced Alvin before and he's not as "treacherous" as he says he is. But he still has a brilliant mind and all."

"But . . ."

"But, even with that I'm still, afraid, of him hurting and possibly killing the people I care about. I mean there was this one girl, Heather, who lied to all of us, just so she could prevent Alvin from killing her parents. If something were to happen to my dad, or Astrid, or Toothless, I'd never forgive myself. And it would all be my fault since they're doing this to protect me." I say.

"So you're not so much scared of Alvin himself, but you're just scared of him hurting everyone?" she concludes.

"Yes, and thank you for summing that up." I classically say.

"Don't worry Hiccup," She places her hand on my shoulder. "Your father's more than capable of keeping you safe. And with the dragons here, there's no way you can lose."

I look to her and her face shows something so, genuine, that I actually start to believe her. And could she be right? Dragons are amazing and definitely powerful creatures, and Alvin still needs to learn how to train them, if he ever can. That's really the only reason he even wants me. I begin to remember about how Toothless and I defeated the Green Death – the head of the dragons back when we were fighting them. It certainly was a challenge, and we managed to outsmart it. But in turn I lost my foot, and nearly died.

"You seem so sure, how do you know?" I ask Skullette.

"Because I know you." She says.

"What? We only met, like yesterday." I point out.

"I know, but, I can just tell. You seem so strong and smart. And you could probably outsmart Alvin any day you wanted." She says.

"Maybe, but . . . I just don't know Skullette. I mean, all I want is for everyone to be safe."

"And with your help, they will be. They're not doing this just because, they're doing it to keep you safe, just like I am." She says.

My cheeks feel red. I don't know if things will be the same with Alvin, but all I know is that I need to keep my friends and my dad safe. But something else catches my senses, she said she's protecting me too, but for her to do that-

"Skullette . . . ?"

She turns and she can tell I've figured it out. And she just nods her head. She's going to be a soldier. My heart suddenly hurts, like someone is stabbing it with pins and needles. She must've gotten approval from her father. He and I both know she's a fighter, but all she's done is add her names of people I need to protect, or of people I could possibly lose.

"What?! Are you crazy?!" I suddenly snap.

"Hiccup," she starts

"No really, tell me, are you crazy?!" I repeat.

"Hiccup, I just want to keep you safe." She says in a calm voice.

"I don't care! You can't join the army!"

"Why not?" Her voice had a tone as if I had insulted her.

"Because I'm trying to keep you safe!" I blurt out.

This makes her go silent. I don't want anyone to hurt her. I need to keep her safe; even if it seems sexist. But to do that, it would

require a previously unthinkable act.

I'd have to be a soldier in the battle.

Convincing everyone to let me in I will be the most complicated, but it's the only thing I can think of. It's the only way I can protect my friends and help in driving off Alvin. But my dad will surely be against it. He'd reject me for the same reason I'm even joining. But he has to let me join, and even if he doesn't, I'll do everything on my own. I'll train on my own, and I'll learn from Skullette and Astrid on how to handle weapons, and I'll fly with Toothless to practice aerial attacks.

Skullette still hasn't said anything. She just stares at me, her cheeks slightly pink. I just stare at her, my mouth clamped shut. But I finally say, "I don't want anyone to hurt you." My voice was barely audible. She stays quiet.

"Why don't we go hunting?" I suggest.

We both get up and leave our posts. For the next hour, we spend it together hunting. Skullette manages to set aside the awkwardness from before, and teaches me everything she can before the hour's over.

She stands aside while I do all the killing to help me tweak my skills, jumping in when needed. She also teaches me about testing and seeing if the animal has any diseases or rabies. Along with trading the kills for either money or any other essentials I need from the villagers. I'm highly open to the options, and it makes me curious as to why I've never done this before. Bucket and Mulch usually catch everything, but doing it all on my own, I can see why she says you get this sense of independence.

It's getting close to where I have to go meet Astrid for my axe throwing lesson. By then I've managed to shoot at least one squirrel that practically ran over my toes in its quest for acorns. But the real prizes came from my snare traps which had caught eight rabbits total. Skullette helps in skinning and gutting them, then loading them in my burlap sacks. As we're heading back, there's this tension or awkward silence between us, and I know it's because of what I said back at the Cove.

As we're nearing the edge of the woods, finally I can't take it. "Listen Skullette, about what I said, I just don't want you to get hurt. I mean, I appreciate that you volunteered, but I'll just be worried about you." I say.

"I know Hiccup. But I don't need you to protect me. I'll be with your father and my father." she retorts.

"Even with that, what if Alvin captures you and uses you as bait. Or what if he hurts you even after I give myself up?" I say, becoming very negative.

"Hiccup, you're overreacting." Skullette says.

"Or being realistic." I snap back. "Look, not only that, but I just feel left out. I mean everyone's protecting me and I don't need it." Skullette gives me this "Are you sure?" look. "Okay, maybe in the

sense to keep Alvin away, but not like I need it twenty-four seven."

"Well, then why don't you tell them that?" she asks.

"Because many people won't believe me, and they'll think I'm just being stubborn and-"

"Well, why don't you prove to them you can take care of yourself?"

"I have to my dad, he's just going over-the-top because he's my dad." I say.

"And what about the other Vikings? How're you going to show them?" she asks.

I stop walking and take a deep breath. "I'm going to be a soldier."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>~Hey guys, sorry if this seems a little rushed. I couldn't really think of how to expand their time together without boring you. ;3 But please keep reading and let me know what you think.~<strong>

#### 4. Chapter 4

"No! No! No!"

"Dad, please listen."

"No! Absolutely not, I forbid it!"

"Dad, please!" I plead.

Back home, I had been waiting anxiously for my father to come home. I had just told him everything. And this is how he answers. Thankfully I have Skullette come home with me, or else I would' never have told him in the first place.

"Hiccup, I'm trying to protect you from Alvin, and you want to go out and join the fight?!"

"Yes! Honestly I thought you'd be happy for me. Wanting to fight alongside my dad, in the war, fighting."

"Normally I would be, if I weren't about you. Putting you on that field is like putting a target right on your chest."

"That's why I need training. I could work with Gobber and Skullette. And even Astrid. They can teach me and I could even do some aerial attacks with Toothless." I persuade.

"Look, Hiccup, I'm speaking as your father not as your chief, and you have to understand why I'm doing this. I just don't want to lose another one of my family to him." He speaks as he puts his hand on my shoulder.

I fully understand the point my dad's trying to make, and normally this gesture and signal of love for me would move me to tears, but my drive to take Alvin down sways my decision.

"Look, dad, I know how against this you are and how you're just trying to protect me. But in a way, this is my fight with Alvin. Shouldn't I be the one to end it? What better way than to prove fighting, on the front lines alongside you? Father and son. Not to mention I would look incredibly weak if I had let someone else protect me." I say. My dad ponders on this thought. "Dad, I feel like I have to do this. This is my fight. I can't just sit back and let everyone else fight it for me. I need to fight for myself, and prove I'm strong enough to handle myself."

"He's already beaten Alvin twice, Stoick. Imagine how good he could possibly be as a soldier?" Skullette adds to the discussion.

My father sighs and there's a long pause before he asks, "You're sure you want to do this Hiccup?"

"I do. To protect Toothless. To protect Skullette, and everyone I care about."

My father sighs, "Alright. You will train with the others. And I'll see to it Gobber assigns you a weapon. That is if you want one."

"A bow." I blurt. My father looks to me with surprise. "I want a bow."

"Really? I didn't know you had an interest in archery, son." He says.

"I know, but it's probably the only weapon I really can handle. And also I can train with Skullette. She's a great hunter." I see Skullette smile and brush her bangs out of her face. And I think I see her slightly blush.

"Well, good to know you'll be having some practice." My father says. "I'm going to go to Gobber and tell him about your new weapon. In the meantime, I need you two to start training immediately."

"Sure dad. But before we start, I need to tell Astrid I'll be training with her too." I say.

Once I finish talking with Astrid, I leave with Skullette and we head to Gobber's shop. Unfortunately, he won't have my new bow ready for at least a few days. Which really is weird since it takes only a few hours to make a wooden bow. Wait, wood. Maybe that's it; he's trying to make me a special bow? Whatever the case, I'll be using Skullette's bow until its ready.

As a practice start, I'll be training with Skullette in the woods for the next few days. Every morning we do exercises to strengthen our bodies. We run and lift things and stretch our muscles. Every afternoon we work on combat skills, throwing knives, fighting hand to hand; Skullette even teaches me to climb trees. We both excel under the new regimen, though. It also gives me something to do. Goathy puts me on a special diet to gain weight. My dad helps treat my sore muscles.

I seem to be doing pretty good, and am I imagining it? Or am I actually getting stronger? I can pull back a tighter string on the bow, and I even shot down my own deer in the woods. But when it's time for me to report to my training at 7:30, reality slaps me in the face. I've been funneled into a class of relative beginners, fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds, which seems a little insulting until it's obvious that they're in far better condition than I am. Even with my access training. After we stretch, there's a couple of hours strengthening exercises and a five mile run.

This goes on for a week.

It's tough, and I don't know if I can make it even with Skullette's motivational talks. At dawn, Gobber drags me out of bed, determined to get me to training.

"I don't think I can do this." I confess.

"You can do it. I know you can. You're the chief's son aren't you?" he supports. And I get dressed.

I must be the chief's son to make it through the morning. I think I'm going to lose it when I realize it's pouring outside. I clench my jaw and stomp out into the mud. Rain drenches me as I work my body and then slog around the running course. I bail out after a mile, again, and I have to resist the temptation to take off my shirt so the cold water can sizzle off my ribs.

I force down my lunch of soggy fish and beet stew. In the afternoon I learn how to assemble a bow " even though I've got a pretty good grip already. I manage it. Even though the rain continues, the afternoon's an improvement because I'm in the shooting range. At last, something I'm good at. It does take some adjusting, but by the end of the day, I've got the best score in my class.

As I'm getting ready to head home, Gobber calls me over. He wants me to do a shooting test. Only this time, I'll be put on the course we used for the Thawfest games " where we and our dragons had to shot at the enemy and spare our friends. I'm given a tarp to pull over myself for the rain. I'm given the same bow I used in training and a full sheath of arrows.

I take my initial position and walk on hunter's feet, like Skullette taught me. I walk through, and then there's a sudden shift in the wind current. A wooden dummy pops up and I skewer it right through the heart. Another pops up, and he loses his eye. Then the trainer with me begins to launch these fake birds high into the air for me to hit. I'm hitting every one and he starts to increase the number of birds he sends airborne.

When I manage to take down five in one round, without pausing I shoulder-roll forward, come up on one knee, and send an arrow into one of the targets high above the range floor. The dummy falls into a fire pit and a shower of sparks burst from the pit. I'm breathing fairly heavy and I have a couple beads of sweat materializing on my forehead, but my trainer nods in approval with a satisfied grin. Meaning I had exceeded her expectations.

"Fine job, Soldier." She says. I never knew her real name since I've

been training separately, but I can tell she's one of those no-nonsense kind of person.

As I'm heading back home, I manage to pull together enough energy to go with Skullette into the woods. Along with that, I have to meet Astrid every other day for my axe throwing lessons. Then I need to go flying with Toothless to practice my aerial attacks. My training has left to no time for any of them.

Nonetheless, I throw myself into training with a vengeance. Eat, live, and breathe the workouts, drills, weapons practice, lectures on tactics. A handful of us are moved into an additional class that gives me hope I may be a contender for the actual war. The soldiers call it the Simulated Street Combat. The instructor breaks us into squads of eight, and we attempt to carry out missions "gaining a position, destroying a target, searching a home" as if we're really fighting our way through the Outcast's territory.

The things rigged so that everything that can go wrong for you does. A false step triggers a snare trap, a sniper appears to your sides, your weapon gets stolen, the sound of a crying child leads you into an ambush, your squadron leader gets hit by a flaming arrow and you have to figure out what to do without orders. Part of me knows it's fake and that they're not going to kill me. If you set off a snare trap, you have to pretend to fall to the ground dead. But in other ways, it feels pretty real "the enemy soldiers dressed in Outcast uniforms, the confusion of a smoke bomb. They even gas us using the Zibbleback's gas.

I'm the only one who gets my mask on in time. The rest of my squad gets knocked out for ten minutes. And the supposedly harmless gas I took a few lungfuls of gives me a wicked headache for the rest of the day.

In my rare moments of downtime, I anxiously watch the preparations of an invasion due to take place in a matter of weeks. I'm hoping I'll be eligible in time. The only pleasure I have out of everything happening is the fact that I'm the only one they allowed in the war. Apart from Skullette who received special permission from her father. Seeing Snotlout argue with Gobber about letting me in was, honestly hilarious. Gobber gave him a practice test on one of the courses I easily passed, and Snotlout failed seconds after he was signaled to go.

One morning, Gobber unexpectedly tells me that he's recommended me for an exam, and I'm to report immediately. There are four parts to it: an obstacle course that assesses your physical condition, a written tactics exam "which is probably the one that most likely will sway my chances on becoming a soldier" a test of weapons proficiency, and a simulated combat situation in a special area of the underground training arena. You go through alone. You're not allowed to have your dragons. There's no predicting what situation you'll be thrown into.

I don't even have time to get nervous for the first three and do well. But another young Viking soldier tells me the situation on the combat course is all designed to target an individual's weaknesses.

My weaknesses? That's a door I don't even want to open. But I find a



spot and try to assess what they might be. The length of the list depresses me. Lack of physical brute force. A bare minimum of weapon handling. And somehow my standing as the chief's son doesn't seem to be an advantage in a situation where they're trying to get us to blend into a pack. They could nail me to the wall on any number of things.

By now I'm really over thinking the whole thing. By the time my name's called, I don't know what my strategy should be. Fortunately, once I'm in, a certain amount of training does kick in.

It's an ambush situation.

Outcasts appear almost instantly. And I have to make my way to a rendezvous point to meet up with my scattered squad. I slowly navigate the Plaza " which had been cleared just for my training drill " taking out Outcasts as I go. Two on the rooftop to my left, another in the doorway up ahead. It's challenging, but not as hard as I expected. There's a nagging feeling that if it's too simple, I must be missing the point. I'm within a couple of buildings from my goal when things begin to heat up. A half dozen Outcasts come charging around the corner. They will outgun me, but I notice something. A barrel of willow charcoals and coal lying carelessly in the gutter.

This is it. My test. To perceive that blowing up the barrel will be the only way to achieve my mission. Just as I step out to do it, my squadron leader, who's been fairly useless up to this point, quietly orders me to hit the ground. Every instinct I have screams at me to ignore the voice, to shoot the flaming arrow, to blow the Outcasts sky-high. And suddenly, I realize what the military will think my biggest weakness is. From my first moment back when we were fighting dragons, when I ran out and shot Toothless down, to the time I didn't cage the dragons when my father demanded it, to my impulse race to get the dragons and farm animals during that one bad snow storm. I cannot take orders.

I smack into the ground so hard and fast, I'll be picking gravel out of my chin for a week. Someone else blows up the barrel. The Outcasts die. I make my rendezvous point. When I exit the Plaza, Gobber congratulates me, and stamps my hand with squad number 587, and tells me to report to the Great Hall. Almost giddy with success, I run through the village, skidding around corners, bounding up the steps to the Hall. I bang into the room before the oddity of the situation dawns on me: I shouldn't be in the Hall, I should be getting fitted for my uniform.

My father, who was in the middle of a war plan, walks away from his spot, smiles, and shakes his head when he sees me. "Let's see it." Unsure how, I hold out my stamped hand. He smiles broadly, "You're with me son! It's a special unit of sharpshooters. Join your squad." He nods over to a group lining the wall. Skullette. Mulch. Bucket. Gobber. Five others I don't know. My squad. I'm not only in, I get to work under my dad. With my friends.

After the meeting is adjourned, Skullette takes my hand and leads me into the woods to celebrate our own way. Despite the long day, I follow her in and we make our way to the Cove. She had packed her leather bag filled with food and a few flasks of tea. We sit by the water, which emanates an iridescent glow from the moonlight.

We start a fire and a conversation about training, the dragons, the weapons. Everything we never had the time to talk about before. Skullette occupies herself with turning the food in the leather bag into a meal for us. Toasting bread and cheese, coring apples, placing chestnuts in the fire to roast. I watch her hands, her beautiful, capable fingers. Soft like satin, compared to mine scarred. Hands that have the power to hunt animals but the gentleness to calm anyone or anything consumed with terror. Hands I trust.

I finish and take a drink of tea from the flask before I let her continue with her story. We continue long after the fire's gone out. The night seems strangely warm compared to other nights. I'm happy about it. I want to spend as much time with Skullette as much as possible. With no weather, or training, or duties to separate us. My extreme preoccupation since I started training has left little attention for her. As she's finishing her flask of tea, I give my last slice of an apple.

"Hey Hiccup," she starts, and I turn my attention to her. "Can I ask you something?"

My cheeks feel a little warm, but I force myself to talk, "Yeah, sure."

"When you said you wanted to be in the war, I was, greatly apprehensive about it."

"Why?" I ask genuinely intrigued, but then I decided to make a joke out of it. "Because I'm so small and weak?"

She giggles and I nudge her knee. "No, just because I wanted to know why. I mean, the entire village is trying to protect you from Alvin, and then you want to go on the front lines and fight. I'm just trying to figure out why."

I turn my head to the glass-like surface of the water and take a deep breath, "My reason is the same as yours, sort of. I don't just want to sit back and let people fight my battles for me. I need to fight for myself, and to also help protect the people I love." I pause and see that I've gained her full attention. She hasn't spoken yet, but probably because she's waiting for me to finish. "Not only that, but I feel like it's an obligation."

"How?" she asks.

"Because, I started this fight." I admit.

"Hiccup, Alvin's been the enemy of Berk for centuries. You didn't start this."

"Yes I did." I counter. "I was the one who showed Alvin that dragons could be trained. I showed him how he could do it. And while he hasn't caught on, I feel like, since I started his new line of raids, I should be the one to finish it. What better way to end a war than by having the 'Dragon Conqueror' defeat Alvin the Treacherous?" I add.

"Hiccup, you don't \_have \_to do this, and I'm not trying to tell you no, but you don't."

"I know. But I want to. This is my fight, and I should end it." I conclude.

Skullette sighs, but it wasn't the kind that follows after you've lost an argument, the kind that you get when you've finally gotten an answer to a long-nagging question.

She turns her head back to the water, and strangely, that's when I say, "While we're being honest here, I was a little worried about you entering the war too." I confess.

She turn her head to me, "Because I'm a little girly?" she jokes.

"No, no. I was just worried."

"Why?" she beckons.

"Well, the main reason why I joined the war was to help protect the people I care about, to help keep them alive since I put their lives in danger in the first place. And when I found out you were accepted, I was happy but sad." I pause and catch Skullette tilt her head to the side in wonder. "I mean, it's great since we get to be together, but it only makes it that much harder to keep you safe." I realize the meaning of my words right after I finish. My heart quickens and I have the impulse to cover my mouth. But I simply turn to Skullette, and she's smiling.

"That's so, sweet." She says.

I run my fingers through my hair, irritated now that she's found out. "Uh, yeah, well." And I turn away from her gaze.

"Hiccup . . ." she starts and I hear her shift closer.

My face feels hot, but I force myself to look at her, only to find her a few inches from my face. Her beautiful lips, smooth and soft. I flick my eyes to meet her gaze, and they speak of longing. I then tilt my head, lean in, and I meet her lips to mine. I feel like my entire body has ignited. Like one of Toothless' blasts have hit it me in the back, and is now running all through my body. Coursing through my veins. Of all the kisses I've been given to by Astrid, this was the only one, where I felt, something.

I feel her tilt her head deepening the kiss. My hand finds her cheek and I gently cradle it like it's glass. She moves closer and I wrap her in my arms. My lips brushing the soft skin on her neck, working their way to her mouth again. In the fading light of the fire, I kiss her more to express all of the feelings I have withheld from her. I feel the sensation inside me grow warmer and spread out from my chest, down through my body, out along my arms and legs, to the tips of my being. It feels so good, so incredibly good.

When we part, I give her another on her forehead, which has become warm. I scoot over to a rock, and Skullette joins me, snuggled down in my arms. She rests her head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her back to protect her. She peers up to me and I peer down. I kiss her again and she smiles so broadly, I actually think she's being serious. Not just the aftermath of a long night out. She

nestles her head in the crook of my neck, and I can almost feel her heartbeat. Of all the pleasant things I can think about, the one that nags at me is the most troubling.

How hard will I have to work to keep Skullette alive?

## 5. Chapter 5

The next morning, the sun feels hard on my face even with the canopy of the trees. I flutter my eyes open and still find Skullette wrapped in my arms. Her hair isn't even messed up expect for the aftermath of when the wind blowing through it. I almost don't want to wake her she looks so peaceful. But nonetheless I wake her with tender touches. Her eyes flutter open as well, and when she looks up to me, she smiles as if she'd be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. It gives me goose bumps.

She yawns and asks, "What time is it?"

"Probably around nine o'clock." I answer.

Skullette sits up and stretches, uncoiling her muscles. She scratches her head and I help her to her feet. The fire has completely burned out. I'm surprised no one has come looking for us. She kisses me on the lips before she gathers her burlap sacks. I sling the bows and sheaths over my shoulders, and as we start walking, she laces our hands together, intertwining our hands. I blush until I feel her move closer. We walk like this back to and through the village. We receive some looks and glances, but I just feel empowered.

I finally found someone. Who loves me for me. Not just because I'm the hero of the village, or the son of the chief "not that that's ever helped me in the past" but because we actually share a bond. It feels so rejuvenating to know someone loves me, cares about me. As we're walking through the village, I catch sight of Snotlout and Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Tuffnut and Snotlout give me the death glare, but I give them a smirk.

It wasn't until we're right outside of Gobber's shop that I remembered he had my new bow finished. We walk in still holding hands, and Gobber's singing his silly tune, so when he finally notices us, we give him a start.

"Well, look at you two." He says with a smile. "Ah, young love."

We both smile and laugh, and I think we even simultaneously blush. I let go of Skullette's hand, and place her bows and sheaths to the side. While she browses Gobber's inventory of bows, I ask him about my own.

"Ah yes, I'll be right back." Then he heads into the back of the shop.

While we're waiting, I join Skullette. I never noticed Gobber even had a wide variety of bows and arrows. In fact he had an entire wall of deadly archery weapons. I've played with a lot of them I training, but none designed for military combat.

Gobber soon comes back with a tall, rectangular case, bounded in

leather. He comes up to me and Skullette and lifts the case and hands it to me. "For you." He says.

I set the case on the face of the anvil and unwrap the leather cover. The case opens on squeaky hinges, and inside, on a bed of crushed velvet " which Gobber must've obtained from Trader Johann " lies a stunning black bow. "Oh." I whisper in admiration. I lift it carefully into the air to admire the exquisite balance, the elegant design, and the curve of the limbs.

"Gobber, this is amazing." I say, my face having a smile so broad it probably looks like a grimace.

"Yep, I wanted to give you something original. Something all your own. This way, you'll stand out among the other soldiers." He says. "And that's not all, we also have a uniform for you that the seamstresses will be done with by, the end of today if I'm right."

"Wait, my uniform? I didn't even know someone made a design." I say.

"Oh yeah. In fact I have the book. I'll show you." She goes and retrieves the thing from a shelf above the fire pit.

It's a fairly new book made of parchment and leather. I open the cover to find a picture of myself standing straight and strong, in a black uniform. Only one person could've designed the outfit, at first glance utterly utilitarian, at second a work of art. The swoop of the helmet, the curve of the breastplate, the slight fullness of the sleeves to help when I'm drawing my bow. In her hands, I truly am the Dragon Conqueror.

Skullette.

"Did you . . ." I ask as I turn to her, and she just has a bashful look on her face, along with a slight pinkness.

"Go on, flip through." She encourages.

I turn the pages slowly, seeing each detail of the uniform. The carefully tailored layers of body armor, the hidden weapons in the belt and boot, the special reinforcements over my heart. It's simply amazing.

"You'll be the best-dressed Viking in history." Gobber says, and that's when I find him hovering over my shoulder.

Once he realizes he's in too close, he backs off and resumes a checkup with a Gronckle. But before he resumes, he advises us to go to the seamstresses so they can help with the uniform. I clutch the book close to my chest and take a deep breath. I can feel Skullette place her dainty hand on my shoulder. Suddenly, I realize she's been holding out on me. She wanted me to make this decision all along. This must be the right decision. If Skullette wanted it. I give her a sort of thankful kiss on the cheek and we both leave.

Walking hand-in-hand once again, we make our way to the seamstresses' shop which is the second house on our right in the Plaza.

Since I'll be in a combat zone, the head Seamstress " Bertha " helps me incorporate the armor Skullette designed. A helmet of some interwoven metal that fits close to my head. The material's supple like fabric, and can be drawn back like a hood in case I didn't want it up full-time. A vest to reinforce the protection over my vital organs. A retractable knife that clicks to my forearm by an armguard and that can be hidden under the sleeve of my uniform. With a flick of my wrist, it flips forward and can deliver a fatal blow when an Outcast gets too close. I notice the tip of the blade is a sickly greenish color. It wasn't until I catch the slightest whiff of the substance that I realize.

Poison.

"From the juice of the Andl't Berry." Bertha says. "This'll definitely do the trick, but you only have a certain amount. Use it wisely."

Finally, with the help of Skullette, the seamstresses strap a sheath divided into three cylinders of arrows to my back. "Just remember: Right side, fire. Left side, explosive. Center, regular. You shouldn't need them, but better safe than sorry."

I take a close look at the explosive and fire arrows. The fire ones have a special flammable substance that can be lit by Toothless, but what if he isn't with me and I need to shoot? I turn to Skullette and she points to my bow. I peer closer to the grip handle and see a small sliver of sandpaper on the arrow rest. When pulling back, the tip will be directly next to the sandpaper, and when I release the string, the friction will ignite the arrow. For the explosive arrows, I'll only have a total of ten seconds before the arrows explode. The result can be catastrophic, so I need to use them carefully and quickly.

"There, you're all set." The seamstresses step back and admire their work.

I had expected the uniform to be ill-fitting and tight in certain places where it would be uncomfortable. But instead, I feel great. Everything fits, and I can move with ease.

"Move around. Make sure everything feels comfortable." Bertha says.

I walk, run in a circle, and swing my arms about. "Yes, it's fine. Fits perfectly."

Outside I can hear the flap of Toothless' wings, and within a few seconds, he's entered the shop and has pinned me to the dirt, licking my face. "Okay, okay, okay! Toothless!" I say with a laugh.

Once I lug him off me, I find my dad standing in the doorway. As if still wanting to impress him, I stand straight like in the painting, and puff out my chest as best I can. Fortunately with the added armor, it appears bigger.

My dad smiles and even gets a little water in his eyes. "My boy." He says. He walks toward me. "Look at you. So strong, and confident." He places a hand on my shoulder. "My boy. My warrior."

Without another word, since I know he's bound to cry, he turns and leaves after taking a deep breath. I smile as he leaves, but before he goes, he informs me about the fleet of ships leaving tomorrow for Outcast Island. I nod, and he's gone.

Toothless sniffs all over my uniform, inspecting it. It wasn't until I reach out and stroke his head, that I notice the color of my uniform and his skin are exactly the same. I try to think of the motivation behind it. How this could be used to my advantage. It could definitely help when I'm sneaking around an enemy camp in the dead of night. I'll easily be consumed by the shadows. Or when I'm going in for an ambush attack. But most importantly, when I'm flying with Toothless, we'll be molded together as one. We'll be invisible to the enemy. If I were to wear my normal clothes, I would do a decent job at blending in, but I would still be spotted.

Bertha walks up and tells me to hold out my hand. She takes out a string sack, shakes a few royal blue berries into her hand, and holds them out to me. "We named them Oleander in your honor, Hiccup. We can't afford for you to be captured by the Outcasts. But I promise you, it will be completely painless."

I take the berries in my hand, unsure of where to put it. Bertha taps a spot on my shoulder at the front of my left sleeve. I examine it and find a tiny pocket that both secures and conceals the berries. Even if my hands were tied, I could lean my head forward and bite it free.

Skullette, it seems, has thought of everything.

Suddenly wanting to try out the new arrows I received, I ask the seamstresses if I can leave so I can head to the Dragon Academy. They agree since I'll get the chance to see out my uniform feels. I tell Skullette to get Gobber so we can practice. In the meantime, I walk with Toothless to the Academy. I receive more looks than before with my new uniform on. I pass a small group of Viking girls, and when they see me, they giggle and whisper. I feel more self-conscious rather than cocky. I'm not the cocky type like Snotlout, and while I should feel flattered about the looks, it rubs me the wrong way for some reason. So I try to occupy myself by either scratching Toothless or admiring my new bow. Switching between the two if needed.

I pass by Astrid's and Fishlegs' house on my way to the Academy. Snotlout and the twins join them once Fishlegs calls them over to see my new uniform.

"Wow. Looks like they're going all out for you." Astrid says with a smile.

"This is so amazing! I've never seen such a uniform like this!" Fishlegs says with excitement. Periodically rubbing the fabric between his fingers.

"I don't understand why they're let you in, when I'm clearly the one who needs to face Alvin." Snotlout brags. I roll my eyes in unison with Astrid.

"Well, probably because I'm the chief's son, and Alvin wants me, and not you." I retort.

Snotlout snarls and I give him my best smirk. I feel fingers trace along the upper limb of my bow, and while it was unintentional, it was a mere reflex; but I jerk my bow back, and find Astrid with a shocked face.

"Oh, sorry." She says. "I didn't think it was that important." Her tone didn't indicate sarcasm.

"No, no it's okay. Gobber designed this for me, and I just got it today, and I want to keep it as new as possible." I say in an attempt to ease her nerves.

"Those arrows look really cool too." She points out. Clearly not offended at my reaction, thankfully.

"Oh yeah. Gobber designed these too." I say. "I was actually just about to try them out at the Academy if you want to come." I suggest.

They all agree in excitement and unison. And as we're walking, Fishlegs asks all about my uniform and weapon. What kind of damage can it do? How will it perform in battle? How far can I shoot? Who made it for me?

That last question makes my stomach knot and my throat tighten. I felt so nervous about telling them that Skullette made it for me. Especially Astrid. The full weight of my situation with Skullette hits me. And yet, I feel like I shouldn't be guilty or nervous at all. Astrid and I never were an official couple, and even with all the kisses she gives me, we never went out in public, holding hands and kissing like I did with Skullette. I have nothing to be guilty about. Maybe it's just the thought of hurting her feelings, since it is obvious we have a mutual attraction. So I swallow hard, and force myself to say it. I surprise myself my answering in a steady voice, "Skullette made it for me."

As expected, this catches Astrid's attention. I can tell she's holding back by the tone in her voice. "Really? I didn't know she was an artist."

"Uh, designer to be more accurate. And yeah, she seems to have a natural talent for figuring out body size and height." I say, and I feel immense relief when Fishlegs jumps in.

"You can say that again. This fabric is amazing. Perfectly framed to your body type and flame retardant." He observes. He does get a few looks, but I laugh nonetheless.

When we reach the Academy, I see Gobber and Skullette have already set up a target range for me to shoot. We walk in and once I walk up to Skullette, we kiss each other hello as if by habit. Suddenly the horror of what I just did hits me like one of Toothless' plasma blasts.

I can't stop my eyes from widening, and when I turn to find Astrid, my assumption was correct. Her eyes are wide and her mouth slightly agape. The anguish I feel from her pain wells up in my chest and threatens to register on my face. But I force myself to stay calm. I never thought I'd be so grateful to Snotlout as he says, "Whoa! You two are together?!" he asks, shocked.



"Yep," Skullette says. I'm surprised at her confidence. I'm only hoping it's because she's unaware of the tension between me and Astrid, and not because she's trying to rub it in Astrid's face. I feel a little better as she holds my hand. While it may seem as a validation to others, it's her private message to me. Saying she'll stand by me, and aid me for the subconscious battle about to go down.

"So, you two are a couple now? Officially?" Astrid asks. Clearly trying extremely hard not to grit her teeth.

"Yes. But we just started going out." I say in an attempt to lighten things.

"But, so far so good." Skullette adds.

"Alright Hiccup! Let's get started! Let's see how that bow works with ya'."

Astrid walks ahead along with Fishlegs. As we're walking, I whisper under my breath, "Don't leave my side."

"I'm right here," she answers quietly.

"All right Hiccup, let's see those arrows fly!" Gobber calls.

"They won't fly far. Let me show you how it's really done." Snotlout says, and he goes for my bow.

Within the single second it takes him to reach for my bow, I turn and duck and whip my prosthetic leg at his ankles. He slips and suddenly I have his head locked in the bend of my knee. He's pounding the ground begging for air and trying to unlock my knee, but it's stuck like a vise. My coordination and reflexes are more improved than I imagined.

"Okay, okay! Mercy, mercy!" Snotlout says, still smacking the ground with his palms.

I finally unlock my knee, and he springs up and rubs his neck. "Whoa, Hiccup! I didn't know you knew how to do that!" Fishlegs exclaims.

"It's your training. Your reflexes have improved, Hiccup." Gobber says as he walks up to us. "This just shows there's a Viking in you." Suddenly he swings a knife at me, and I block it with my bow. It ricochets off and sticks to the rock ground a couple yards away.

"Now, let's see that bow." He says.

The arrows that Gobber designed are no less remarkable than the bow. Between the two, I can shoot with accuracy over one hundred yards. The variety of arrows turns the bow into a multipurpose weapon. Each one is recognizable by a distinctive colored shaft.

Gobber then removes the standard targets and replaces them with wooden standees of Outcast Vikings. I take my initial position and pull back the string. I skewer the dummy in the heart. After a few

more shots, Gobber seeing the standees offer no challenge for me, begins to launch these fake birds high into the air for me to hit. It seems kind of stupid at first, but it's actually kind of fun. Much like hunting a live animal. I'm hitting every one and he starts to increase the number of birds he sends airborne. When I manage to take down five in one round, without pausing I shoulder-roll forward, come up on one knee, and send an arrow into one of the hanging flags bordering the Academy. It lands smack dab in the middle of the cross swords.

I'm breathing fairly heavy and I have a couple beads of sweat materializing on my forehead, but Gobber nods in approval with a satisfied grin. Meaning I had exceeded his expectations. Everyone else behind me applauds, and for a moment I feel a sense of pride. Toothless comes up and nudges my arm. I scratch his head and he purrs.

"Well done Hiccup. That was better than I expected." He says.

"Thanks." I say.

As I peer around the arena, I notice a crowd has gathered on all sides. They all stare in admiration and desire. I've been so lost in the shooting I didn't even notice them. My dad was among those of the crowd. His smile so broad and wide, it was actually kind of creepy. But I can't even describe the joy and pleasure I feel. And how he must feel as well. To finally see his 'little embarrassment' finally soldier. A warrior. Maybe there was one inside me somewhere deep down; I just needed something or someone to motivate me to bring him out.

I turn around and find everyone in 'aw'. The same way they were when I had tamed the Zippleback in the arena. Back when I was a nobody. But now, I am the Dragon Conqueror.

And I will show Alvin tomorrow.

## 6. Chapter 6

Toothless's eyes reflect in the faint glow of the moonlight as he lies in his bed, protecting me from the night. He's snuggled close, and the cinders give off a warm orange glow. My Dragon Conqueror uniform lays draped over the back of my desk chair. The sheath of lethal arrows leans against the leg of my desk, the bow above my head on metal hooks. I stare at it. It's beauty, its purpose. It's lethal purpose. How many people it could possibly kill.

After tossing and turning for hours, my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I finally accept that it will be a wakeful night. And I need sleep desperately because out on the battlefield every moment I give into fatigue will be an invitation to death. The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally I'm too restless to even stay in bed. Under Toothless's watchful eye, I tiptoe across the wooden floor. I begin to pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing too short. If I don't get air soon, I think I might collapse. But with my dad downstairs, I'll be forced back into this stuffy cage of a room.

I decide to sit on the roof, getting there through the skylight above my bed. The night's air is so sweet. I take in the scent of the sea, the trees, the grass, even the smell of a dragon's fire after it burns out. I don't want to call this a final goodbye. I would say my chances of living are pretty high, but I guess better now than after I'm lying unconscious on the grass. My arm bumps forward, and I find green orbs staring at me. Toothless slips out of the skylight in such a graceful motion, and then snuggles down next to me.

"What am I going to do?" I ask him, he perks his head up and just wrinkles his nose.

All of what's about to happen tomorrow rushes into me. My mind, my body, my veins. The thoughts become so severe and even scary I begin to shake. I try to go through several reasons on why I should be fine. \_I've beaten Alvin before. I have my dad. I have Gobber. I've had training. I have Toothless.\_

I don't know what's making me shake, but I do stop a little. I would blame the weather, but tonight's actually the most beautiful summer night in Berk. Toothless nudges my hand and licks my face.

"It's okay bud. I'm fine." I lie.

I climb back into my room, and spend the rest of the night snuggled close to Toothless with my blanket, slipping in and out of a daze. Toothless gives a flick of his tail, and as I go to bed, I feel him lick my cheek after I say goodnight.

My dad comes to me before dawn, gives me a simple shirt and pants to wear, as we head to the seamstresses' shop for some final and rather last minute alterations. They simply attached a long flowing cape to my shoulders and that can be attached to my hood with a couple buttons to mimic a cloak. The material's fireproof so I can use it in case we meet any rogue dragons.

Once that's done, I suit up and strap the sheath to my back; which still surprisingly fits just fine with the added cape. Gobber shows up to escort me down to the docks and I find Toothless all saddled up and ready to go. Just as the boat arrives, Astrid and the others appear in a state of agitation. "Hiccup, they won't let us go! I told them they should let us go with you, but they won't even let us ride the boat!"

This genuinely surprises me. I had expected them to ride with me to the island, but I wonder as to why they were denied the trip. I go to my dad and tell him about the misunderstanding, but apparently, the boat's too small for most of us. I didn't think there were that many people coming, but as I'm figuring it out, Toothless suddenly begins to snarl, and I get a cold chill up my spine. I turn and find Mildew walking to the boat.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, not even trying to hide my rudeness.

"Well you'll be happy to know that Stoick had asked me to come along the trip so that I could share a war strategy." It takes everything I have not to face palm my forehead. I won't deny the reason of my father needing him for war advice, but the last thing I need is Mildew causing trouble while on the boat, even though I won't be

riding on the boat at all.

So I ignore him and just walk straight to my dad to solve the issue with Astrid and the others. They're been in battle before and are more than capable of defending themselves. It's when I compromise with my dad to let Skullette ride with me as well as the others riding their dragons as well. Dad agrees and even results to riding Tornado with us. I can hear the Thunderdrum bellow out a low hum.

It takes some hard convincing to get Skullette to hop on Toothless, especially since she hasn't even rode him since the day she got here weeks ago. I think I was supposed to take her, but my training, after becoming a soldier consumed most of the time. I assure her everything's fine, and with a purr and nudge from Toothless, Skullette seems to trust him wholeheartedly.

As we saddle up, I struggle to keep my breakfast down. I'm not sick because of flying sickness, but because of nerves. Suddenly they're all rushing to me. All at once we leap off the pier, then with a few flaps, we rise up and become wrapped in clouds.

Skullette doesn't scream, but instead she squeezes my torso like a vise. Once she feels that we've leveled out, she loosens, but doesn't open her eyes. She keeps her head buried in my shoulder, and pulled close to me.

"It's okay Skullette. Everything's fine." I coo in an attempt to help her release her iron grip.

She lets out a few nervous whimpers, and as she opens her eyes, they're temporally blinded by the sunlight, but once wide open, she slowly lifts her head and peers all around. She stares in aw, just as Astrid did the day she rode with Toothless and I. she looks to me, and we fly higher so she can just run her hands through the clouds. Her face breaks into a smile. Her grip loosens to a relaxed hold. Finally after about five minutes, she rests her head on my shoulder with her arms wrapped around my torso.

After about ten minutes of flying, I ask my dad, "So what are we supposed to do when we get there?"

"Well, for today, you're not doing anything, but paying a visit to the wounded." My father says.

"What?!" I shout. I'm so shocked I accidentally jerk Toothless to the side, causing Skullette to grip me tightly again. "Sorry. Dad what do you mean just visiting the wounded? I thought I was being involved in the war!"

"You will, Hiccup. We just need to get you started. We want to show you to a couple soldiers before we put you in official combat. I'll explain when we get there."

Great, now I can't wait to get there. The ride lasts at least half the day. When we arrive, it's around late afternoon, the sun beginning to set. The boats dock, and the dragons make a quick spiral decent to the ground since there's no official dock. I immediately jump off and confront my dad and Gobber about my assignment. They postpone the conversation until we've reached the secret hideout where we'll be camping until we're ready to invade. Dad hustles us

off the road toward a row of wooden warehouses as a second fleet of boats reaches the shore.

Chief Boggs comes in with the next fleet of ships. This one brings a crate of medical supplies and a crew of six medics. I can tell by their faded white uniforms. Once the supplies are ready, I pull my dad and Gobber aside to talk to them.

"Why aren't I participating?! I thought all my training was to help you win the war!" I say.

"You will get the chance Hiccup, but we've suffered a loss after an ambush attack with flaming catapults and arrows. Several soldiers have been in refuge here for days. And now the only thing they need is to see you here, alive and well, and supporting them." he explains.

Hope.

That's what he's hoping I can give to them. Almost as if my face and just my being here will give them the strength they need to keep enduring this cruel battle. It's understanding, so I agree. But I still keep up with my dad to let me in on the action if and when it comes. The sacrifices I made will not go in vain.

"We'll take it one step at a time, Hiccup." Gobber says. "We'll start you out in the least dangerous situation that can evoke some spontaneity in you. The raid this morning seems to have run its course."

"And I want you armed with a squad of bodyguards, also." My dad orders. He places a hand on my shoulder. "Just let them see you. That will do more than any doctor in the world."

We all follow my dad down an alley that runs between two dull muddy-brown warehouses. Only the occasional access ladder to the roof interrupts the scarred wooden walls. When we emerge to the street, it's like we've entered another world.

The wounded from this morning's raid are being brought in. On homemade stretchers, in wheelbarrows, and carts, slung across shoulders, and clenched tight in arms. Bleeding, limbless, unconscious. Propelled by desperate people to a warehouse with a sloppy painted red cross above the doorway. I had expected bombed-out buildings and instead I find myself confronted with broken bodies.

While my dad directs the Vikings where to go, I can't seem to get my eyes off of the warehouse with the painted red cross on it. I begin to move forward, and when I feel a hand on my wrist, I turn and find Skullette.

I peer around and whisper to her, "I don't know if I can do this."

She must see the panic in my eyes because, she stops a moment and pulls me aside, "Look Hiccup, you'll be fine. The harsh reality is that this is what your dad and other Vikings see in the world. And you do too." She gestures to my prosthetic leg. "You're one of them Hiccup. You know what it's like to be wounded."

"But that's different. I've never had to see all the, blood and guts, and euh!" I shudder at the mention of the gory things.

"Look Hiccup, this is the chance to prove yourself, by facing those things, you'll have conquered yet another mound in your life."

"But you don't understand. Those people, those images are going to haunt me. For the rest of my life. And I just know that they've all messed up the people in our village, somehow." I say.

Skullette stays quiet. This is how I know I'm right. I think back to when I was listening to Gobber, as he was extracting the poison of a Scauldron from Mildew in order to heal our sick dragons. \_I've seen a Nadder's spine slice through a man's eyeball like a grape. I watched my own arm get devoured by a Monstrous Nightmare.\_ Then I suddenly begin to think of what my dad said back when I was fighting dragons. \_Just wait until you spill a Nadder's guts for the first time. And mount your first Gronckle head on a spear.\_

All of those images, even if I've never seen them myself, have always made me cringe. I don't know what Gobber was like before he became a Viking, but I know he's not the same man, whoever that man was, and he's long gone.

A man directing the incoming patients catches sight of us, does a sort of double take, and then strides over. His dark brown eyes are puffy with fatigue and he smells of metal and sweat. A bandage around his throat needed changing about three days ago. The strap of the scabbard slung across his back digs into his neck and he shifts his shoulder to reposition it. With a jerk of his thumb, he orders the medics into the warehouse. They comply without question.

"This is Commander Caesar," says Chief Boggs. "Commander, Soldier Hiccup."

He looks young to be a commander. Early thirties. But there's an authoritative tone to his voice that makes you feel his appointment wasn't arbitrary. Beside him, in my sparkling new outfit, scrubbed and shiny, I feel like a recently hatched baby dragon, untested and only just learning how to navigate the world.

"Yeah, I know who he is," says Caesar. "You're alive, then. We weren't sure." Am I wrong or is there a note of accusation in his voice? This must mean the word of my defeating the Green Death has spread, but apparently people must think I'm dead instead of wounded but alive.

"I'm still not sure myself," I answer.

"Been in recovery." Chief Boggs says. He gestures to my leg. "Lost his foot in battle, but he insisted on coming by to see your wounded." I decide to like Chief Boggs.

"Well, we've got plenty of those," says Caesar.

"And you think this is a good idea?" says Astrid, frowning at the hospital. "Assembling your wounded like this?"

I don't. Any sort of contagious disease would spread through this

place like wildfire.

"I think it's slightly better than leaving them to die," says Caesar. And suddenly Astrid and I both know she did something wrong.

"That's not what I meant," Astrid tells her.

"Well, currently that's my other option. But if you come up with a third and get Stoick to back it, I'm all ears." Astrid then stays quiet and lowers her head. Caesar waves me toward the door. "Come on in, Conqueror. And by all means, bring your friends."

I glance back at the mob that is my crew, steel myself, and follow her into the hospital. Some sort of heavy industrial curtain hangs the length of the building, forming a sizable corridor. Corpses lay side by side, curtain brushing their heads, white cloths concealing their faces. "We've got a mass grave started a few blocks west of here, but I can't spare the manpower to move them yet," says Caesar. He finds a slit in the curtain and opens it wide.

My wrist can feel fingers coil around it. I know it's my dad. This simple gesture whispers, *"I'm right here."* For a moment, I allow myself to feel young again. I'm suddenly a young boy, gripping his father for protection and aide. Toothless walks up and cocks his head to me.

I step through the curtain and my senses are assaulted. My first impulse is to over my nose to block out the stench of soiled linen, putrefying flesh, and vomit, all ripening in the heat of the warehouse. They've propped open a few boards to mimic a skylight, but any air that's managing to get in can't make a dent in the fog below. The thin shafts of sunlight provide the only illumination, and as my eyes adjust, I can make out row upon row of wounded, in cots, on pallets, on the floor because there are so many to claim the space. The drone of black flies, the moaning of the people in pain, and the sobs of their attending loved ones have combined into a wrenching chorus.

We have no real hospitals on Berk. If anyone was sick, we either went to see Goathy — whose home is pretty much like an infirmary — or we just died at home. Which now seems a far desirable alternative to what lies in front of me. Then I remember that many of these people probably lost their homes in the bombings.

Sweat begins to run down my back, fill my palms. I breathe through my mouth in an attempt to diminish the smell. Black spots swim across my field of vision, and I think there's a good chance I could faint. But then I catch sight of Caesar, who's watching me so closely, waiting to see what I'm made of, and if any of them have been right to think they can count on me. So I let go of my dad and force myself to walk into the narrow strip between the two rows of beds.

"Hiccup?" a voice croaks out from my left, breaking from the general din. "Hiccup?" a hand reaches for me out of the haze. I cling to it for support. Attached to the hand is a young woman with an injured leg. Blood has seeped through the heavy bandages, which are crawling with flies. Her face reflects the pain, but something else, too, something that seems completely incongruous with her situation. "Is it really you?"

"Yeah, it's me." I get out.

Joy. That's the expression on her face. At the sound of my voice, it brightens, erases the suffering momentarily.

"You're alive! We didn't know. People said you were, but we didn't know!" she says excitedly.

"I got pretty banged up. But I got better," I say. "Just like you will."

"I've got to tell Gunnar! He's my friend!" The woman struggles to sit up and calls to someone a few beds down. "Gunnar! Gunnar! He's here! It's Hiccup!"

A young man, probably a few years older than me, turns to us. Bandages obscure half of his face. The side of his mouth I can see opens as if to utter an exclamation. I go to him, exchange a good handshake. Murmur a greeting. He can't speak, but his one good eye fixes on me with such intensity, as if he's trying to memorize every detail of my face.

I hear my name ripple through the hot air, spreading out into the hospital. "Hiccup! Hiccup!" The sounds of pain and grief begin to recede, to be replaced by words of anticipation. From all sides, voices beckon me. I begin to move, clasping the hands extended to me, touching the sound parts of those unable to move their limbs, saying hello, how are you, good to meet you.

Apparently, these people have been off the island for a while. It seems like the last time they remember me was when I was still knocked out after I had defeated the Green Death. Dad said I was knocked out for a few weeks. I say nothing of importance, no word of inspiration. But it doesn't matter. Dad was right. It's the sight of me, alive, that is the inspiration.

Hungry fingers devour me, wanting to feel my flesh. As a stricken woman clutches my face between her hands, I resist the impulse to push them off. It's when I see a young man, my age with a left hand missing, that I truly see, these are my people. The damage, the fatigue, the imperfections. That's how they recognize me, why I belong to them.

I begin to fully understand the lengths to which people and my dad have gone to protect me. What I mean to the people of Berk. I have thousands upon thousands of people from Berk at my side. I was their Conqueror long before I accepted the role. A new sensation begins to germinate inside me. But it takes until I am standing on a table, waving my final goodbyes to the hoarse chanting of my name, to define it. Power. I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. It appeared when I spared Toothless's life, Astrid knew it when I showed her I could ride Toothless, and now Dad knows too.

When we're outside again, I lean against the warehouse, catching my breath, accepting a canteen of water from Fishlegs. "That was amazing." He says.

Well, I didn't faint, or throw up, or run out screaming. Mostly I just rode the wave of emotion rolling through the place.



"I didn't do much, really." I say.

"You have to give yourself some credit for what you've done in the past," says Gobber.

What I've done in the past? I think of the trail of destruction in my wake – my knees weaken and I slide down to a sitting position. "That's a mixed bag."

"Well, you're not perfect by a long shot. But times being what they are, you'll have to do." Gobber says.

Astrid squats down beside me, with a crooked smile on her face. "I can't believe you let all those people touch you. I kept expecting you to make a break for the door."

"I know. So did I." I say with a laugh. Toothless sits down and purrs. "Not bad for a hiccup, huh?" I ask him. He nuzzles my face in reply.

"You did great son. Handled that better than I expected." He says. Better than anyone expected I think to myself.

"Is it like this all over the island?" I ask.

"Yes. Most are under attack. We're trying to get in aid wherever we can, but it's not enough." He stops a minute, distracted by a Viking that came up to him and is now whispering something in his ear. "We're to get to the boats. Immediately." Dad says lifting me to my feet with one hand. "There's a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Astrid asks.

"Incoming raid," dad says. He reaches behind my neck and yanks Skullette's helmet up onto my head. "Let's move!"

## 7. Chapter 7

Unaware of what's going on, I take off running along the front of the warehouse, heading for the alley that leads to the boats. But I don't sense any immediate threat. The entire area's empty. There's no enemy, no alarm.

Then the people begin to wail. Within a few seconds, a mob of Outcast Vikings appear before us, and the arrows and catapults begin to fly. I'm blown off my feet, into the front wall of the warehouse. There's a searing pain just above the back of my right knee. Something has struck my back as well, but doesn't seem to have penetrated my vest.

I try to get up, but dad pushes me back down, shielding my body with his own. The ground ripples under me as the impact of the flaming catapults causes the explosions.

It's a horrifying sensation being pinned against the wall as the fireballs rain down. What's the expression my father used for easy kills? Like shooting fish in a barrel. We're the fish, the street the barrel.

"Hiccup!" I'm startled by my dad's voice.

"What? Yes, what?" I answer.

"Listen to me. Tornado and the other dragons can't land during the attack, but it's imperative you're not spotted." He says.

"So they don't know I'm here? I assumed I was my presence that brought on this punishment.

"They think so. His raid was already scheduled." Dad says. Suddenly a different voice comes up. Calm but forceful. The voice of a chief used to calling the shots under pressure. "There's a light gray warehouse three down from us. It has a bunker in the far north corner."

"Can we get there?" I ask.

"We'll do our best." He says.

Everyone must've heard my dad's voice because everyone â€" my bodyguards, my friends â€" are getting up. My eye instinctively searches for Toothless and Skullette. Toothless must've run off somewhere, but I locate Skullette and see she's on her feet, apparently unharmed.

"We've got maybe forty-five seconds to the next wave," dad says.

I give a grunt of pain as my right leg takes the weight of my body, but I keep moving. No time to examine the injury. Better not look now anyway. Fortunately, I have on the shoe that Skullette designed. It grips the asphalt on contact and springs free of it on release. I'd be hopeless in my regular boot. Dad has the lead, but no one else passes me. Instead they match my pace, protecting my sides, my back. I force myself into a sprint as the seconds tick away.

We pass the second gray warehouse and run along a dirt brown building. Up ahead, I see a faded gray facade. Home of the bunker. We have just reached another alley, need only to cross it to arrive at the door, when the next wave of flaming catapults begins. I instinctively dive into the alley and roll toward the gray wall.

This time it's Toothless who throws himself over me to provide one more layer of protection from the attacks. It seems to go on longer this time, but we are further away. I shift onto my side and find myself looking directly into Toothless's eyes. For a moment the world recedes and there is just his stern face, his eye pupils reduced to slits, his nose wrinkling as he tries to catch his breath.

"You all right?" I ask, my words nearly drowned out by an explosion. He replies with a grunt. "I don't think they've seen me. I mean, they're not following us."

Toothless peers in the direction of another catapult slinging off. He urges me to my feet. Still feeling too winded to move, I crawl until my vision is lined with his. They've targeted something else. But what? There's nothing back there but â€"

The realization hits us at the same time. "The hospital." Instantly I

spring up and shout to the others, "They're targeting the hospital!"

"Not your problem!" says Gobber firmly. "Get to the bunker!"

"But there's nothing there but the wounded!" I say.

"Hiccup." I hear the warning note in my dad's voice and know what's coming. "Don't even think about - !" I jump on Toothless and we soar off into the air.

With the distraction gone, I hear another sound. Crossbow fire coming from the roof of the dirt brown warehouse across the alley. Along with the sight of fireballs shooting in the opposite end of the street. Someone is returning fire. Before anyone can stop me, I make a beeline for the roof. We're still close enough to the ground that I can hear a voice, "Don't stop!" I hear Skullette say beneath me.

I watch as she makes a dash for an access ladder and begins to scale it. Climbing. One of the things she does best. Then there's the sound of her boot on someone's face. If it belongs to Gobber, Skullette's going to pay dearly for it later on. I make the roof and help drag Skullette onto the tar. I pull her up beside me, and then we take off for the row of crossbow nests on the street side of the warehouse. Each looks to be manned by a few Vikings. We skid to a nest with a pair of soldiers, hunching down behind the barrier.

"Stoick know you're up here?" to my left I see Caesar behind one of the crossbows, looking at us quizzically.

I try to be evasive without flat-out lying. "He knows where we are, all right."

Caesar laughs. "I bet he does. You been trained in these?" she slaps the stock of her crossbow.

"I have. Back home." Says Skullette. "But I'd rather use my own weapons."

"Yes, we've got our bows." I hold up mine, then realize how decorative it must seem. "It's more deadly than it looks."

"It would have to be." Says Caesar. "All right. We expect three more waves. They have to drop their shields as they reload the catapults. That's out chance. Stay low!" I position myself to shoot from one knee.

"Better start with fire." says Skullette.

I nod and pull an arrow from my right sheath. If we miss our targets, these arrows will land somewhere - probably the warehouse across the street. A fire can be put out, but the damage an explosive can do may be irreparable.

Suddenly they appear on the ground, two blocks down maybe. Fourteen Outcast Vikings in a "V" formation. "Geese!" Skullette yells to me. And I know exactly what she's talking about. She told me about how she hunt's geese back during training. During migration season, when she would hunt fowl, she developed a system with her father of dividing the birds so they don't both target the same ones.

I load the arrow in the bow, and take a quick but good look at it, before I let it go. I get the far side of the V, Skullette takes the near, and we alternate shots at the front soldier. There's no time for further discussion. I estimate the lead time on the Vikings and let my arrow fly. I catch the bicep of an arm, causing him to stop, drop and roll after his arm bursts into flames. Skullette just misses the head honcho. A fire blooms on an empty warehouse roof across from us. She swears under her breath.

The Outcast I hit runs and spins out of formation, but still shots his crossbow arrows. None of them run, though. They stay in the street, but the formation is broken.

"Good shot." says Skullette.

"I wasn't eve aiming for him," I mutter. I'd set my sights on the Viking in from of him. "They're faster than we think."

"Positions!" Caesar shouts. The next wave of Outcasts is appearing already.

"Fire's no good," Skullette says. I nod and we both load explosive-tipped arrows. Those warehouses across the way look deserted anyway.

As the soldiers move in, I make another decision. "I'm standing!" I shout to Skullette, and rise to my feet. This is the position I've learned I get the best accuracy from. I lead earlier and score a direct hit on the Viking, blasting a hole right in front of him and sending him flying back with bits of dirt debris. Skullette blows another Outcast from behind. He flies and crashes into the street. Behind me I can hear Toothless firing with his plasma blast. He hits a catapult and the whole thing sets off a series of explosions as its pieces go up in smoke.

Without warning, a third V formation unveils. This time, Skullette squarely hits the head Outcast of the fleet. I take the back one by surprise, causing him to spin into the Outcast behind him. Together they collide into the pond of an old daycare center. The fourth goes down from a crossbow arrow.

"All right, that's it," Caesar says.

Flames and heavy black smoke from the wreckage obscure our view. "Did they hit the hospital?"

"Must have," he says grimly.

I hurry toward Toothless who somehow got to the far end of the warehouse, the sight of Astrid and Fishlegs emerging from behind a few boards surprises me. I thought they'd still be hunkered down in the alley.

"They're growing on me," Skullette says.

We hop on Toothless and fly off. We stop a few yards away from the remaining line-up of enemy catapults. When my foot hits the ground, I find a bodyguard, and Snotlout and the twins waiting. I expect resistance, but Toothless pulls me to the hospital. Not one to

question a free pass, I take off into the street.

"Oh, no," I whisper as I catch sight of the hospital. What used to be the hospital. I move past the wounded, past the burning catapult wrecks, fixated on the disaster ahead of me. Toothless matches my speed. People screaming, running about frantically, but unable to help. The flaming boulders have collapsed the patients within. A group of rescuers has assembled, trying to clear a path to the inside. But I already know what they will find. If the crushing debris and the flames didn't get them, the smoke did.

I'm scared and surprised to see Gobber at my shoulder. But the fact that he does nothing only confirms my suspicions. Vikings don't abandon an accident until it's hopeless.

"Come on, Hiccup. Stoick says they can get the dragons in for us now." He tells me. But I can't seem to move.

"Why would they do that? Why would they target people who were already dying?" I ask him.

"Scare others off. Prevent the wounded from seeking help," says Gobber. "Those people you met, they were expendable. To Alvin, anyway. If the Outcasts win, what will they do with a bunch of damaged slaves?"

I remember listening all those years to my dad and Gobber discuss about Alvin. Me, not paying close attention. Wondering why they even bothered to dissect his motives. Why thinking like out enemy would ever matter. Clearly, it could've mattered today. When Astrid questioned the existence of the hospital, she, as well as my father and Gobber were not thinking of the disease, but this. Because they never underestimate the cruelty of those we face.

I slowly turn my back to the hospital and find my dad, flanked by Astrid and Skullette and the others, standing a couple yards in front of me. His manner's unrattled. Cool even. I feel suspended in time. Held afloat in a cloud of heat that generates not from my surroundings, but from my own being. Dad appears and gets a firm lock on my arm, but I'm not planning on running now. I look over at the hospital " just in time to see the rest of the structure give way - and the fight goes out of me.

All those people, the hundreds of wounded, the relatives, the medics, are no more. I turn back to Gobber, the swelling on his face left by Skullette's boot. I'm no expert, but I think his nose might be broken. I hear my dad speak, and his voice is more resigned than angry, though. "Back to the boats."

I obediently take a step forward and wince as I become aware of the pain behind my right knee. The adrenaline rush that overrode the sensation has passed and my body parts join in a chorus of complaints. I'm banged up and bloody and someone seems to be hammering on my left temple from inside my skull. Dad quickly examines my face, then scoops me up and jogs for the beach. Halfway there I puke on his shirt, and possibly part of his beard. It's hard to tell because he's short of breath, but I think he sighs.

A small boat, different from the one that transported us here, waits on the water. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Toothless

matching the pace of my dad. The second we're both on board, we take off. I get to smell the sea and fresh air this time. I'm posted above deck so that I can get some fresh air. Dad and Skullette do some emergency first aid on people to hold them until we get back to Berk. I want to take off my vest, since I got a fair amount of vomit on it as well, but it's too cold to think about it.

I lie on the floor with my head in Astrid's lap. Her fingers gently brush a few strands of hair off my sweaty forehead. Toothless enclosing us with his body and wings. The last thing I remember is Gobber spreading a couple of burlap sacks over me.

\* \* \*

><p>When I wake up, I'm warm and patched up in a bed in Goathy's house. She's there, checking my vital signs. I see Gobber walk up behind her. Goathy writes something on the wooden floor, and Gobber translates, "How do you feel?"<p>

"All little beat-up, but all right," I say.

On the bedside table is a piece of shrapnel they removed from my leg. Goathy's more concerned with the damage by brain might've suffered from the explosions. But I don't have double vision or anything and I can think clearly. My breakfast is disappointingly small. Just a few slices of bread and some warm yak milk.

I've been called down to an early morning meeting at the Great Hall. I start to get up and then realize they plan to carry me directly there. I want to fly, but that's out, so I negotiate my way into a wheelchair. I feel fine, really. Except for my head, and my legs, and the soreness from the bruises, and the nausea that hit a couple minute after I ate. Maybe a wheelchair's a good idea.

Gobber first carries me down the steps from Goathy's house, there I find the wheelchair and Toothless. He greets me with a gentle snuggle and an almost, relieved purr. As they wheel me down, I begin to get uneasy about what I will face. Skullette and I directly disobeyed orders yesterday, and Gobber has the injury to prove it. Surely, there will be repercussions. When I get to the Great Hall, the only ones who've arrived are Astrid, Skullette, my dad, Chief Boggs, and Gobber.

Chief Boggs beams and says, "There's our little warrior!" and the others are smiling so genuinely that I can't help but smile in return. As the room fills, I brace myself for a less congenial reception. But the only person who registers any kind of negativity is my dad, and I have a feeling it's more related to the war than my little stunt on Outcast Island. Gobber wears a thick gathering of gauze across the bridge of his nose. I was right about it being broken.

I get wheeled in between Astrid and Skullette. Skullette touches my temple gently, "How do you feel?"

They must've served garlic and squash for the breakfast vegetable. The more people who gather, the stronger the fumes are. My stomach turns and the light from the skylight suddenly seems too bright. "Kind of rocky," I say. "How are you?"

"Fine. They dug out a couple of pieces of shrapnel. No big deal," she says.

Dad calls the meeting to order. "Now, I assume you all know the results of the gathering at Outcast Island yesterday." I watch as people shift their gazes to me. Seeing me in the wheelchair, bruised, streaks of washed away blood. "But all in all it was a success. And Hiccup does deserve a round of applause for his courage. The result is more than we had hoped for." The Vikings applaud, and Astrid, Skullette and the others join in. "Yes, yes. However, given the circumstances, I think we should discuss the decision to send Hiccup into actual combat."

The decision? To send me into combat? Then it's possible he's not mad that I flagrantly disregarded orders, flew away with Toothless, and gave my bodyguards the slip?

"It was a tough call," Dad says, furrowing his brow. "But the general consensus was that we weren't going to get anything worth using if we locked him up in a bunker somewhere every time a catapult goes off."

"And you're all right with that?" asks Gobber.

Astrid has to kick me under the table before I realize he's talking to me. Even with my bruises, she doesn't hold back her strength. "Oh! Yeah, I'm completely all right with that. It felt good. Doing something for a change."

"Well, let's be just a little more judicious with his exposure. Especially now that the Outcasts know what he can do," dad says. There's a rumble of assent from around the fire pit.

After about another hour, my dad sends everyone off. Skullette wheels me back to my bed at my house. We laugh a little about the cover-up. Skullette says no one wanted to look bad by admitting they couldn't control us. I'm kinder, saying they probably don't want to jeopardize the chance of taking us out now that they've gotten a decent look at our fighting style. Both things are probably true. Skullette has to go meet with Gobber for training, down in the blacksmith shop, so I doze off. It seems like I've only shut my eyes for a few minutes, but when I open them, I flinch at the sight of Astrid sitting a couple feet from my bed. Waiting. Possibly for several hours if my time is right.

When she sees me awake, she saunters over and softly sits on my bed. She doesn't say anything, and I don't know what to say to her, so I stay quiet. I don't know if she's expecting me to say something, but something must be on her mind if she's here and the way she's behaving. She doesn't speak, and as I'm about to, her hand moves to my head. Her face shows slight hurt when I flinch. I didn't mean to, it's a reflex since all she's done in the past is punch me as a way of communication.

She just runs her fingers across a puckered scar above my temple with a touch as light as a moth wings.

Then she plants a kiss on my lips, and then disappears.

## 8. Chapter 8

I want to go back to sleep, but I'm restless. Images from yesterday begin to flood into my mind. The attack, the fiery crashes, the faces of the wounded who don't exist anymore. I can see death from all sides. The last moment before seeing a boulder hit the ground, feeling the burn from a catapult and the dizzying nosedive into oblivion, the hospital roof falling down at me while I'm pinned helplessly to my bed. Things I saw, in person. Things I caused with a flap of Toothless's wings. Things I will never be able to release from my memory.

I stop trying to sleep after my first few attempts are interrupted by unspeakable nightmares. After that, I just lie still and do fake breathing whenever my dad checks on me. I have training, but Gobber's scheduled to work with my dad on weapons or something, so I get permission to take Skullette to the woods. After I drop off my Dragon Conqueror suit to the seamstresses, we head to the woods. We wander around for awhile. We don't shoot anything, I guess it's because I have special orders to take it easy.

When we reach a meadow, blooming with banks of wild flowers in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white, we sit quietly. We stay silent so long that a buck wanders into range. Skullette takes it down with an arrow. But we don't haul it back to the village just yet. Skullette doesn't mind me not talking, and doesn't even bother to ask if anything's wrong. Not that I want to talk about it. Most of it she knows is because of what happened on Outcast Island yesterday. But another part of it is about Astrid.

My mind wasn't fully operational when she had, supposedly, kissed me in my bedroom last night. I was halfway asleep, but if she did, I wonder why. Well, obviously I know why, but I still want to know. Was it because I was hurt? Or because I'm with Skullette? Her kissing me for that sends me over the edge in anger. She had all those chances, all those years to make a move. And now, now that I have someone, she suddenly likes me?! I can't stand it! If she keeps this up, she'll just get me confused. Because as much as I hate to admit it, even to myself, I still have feelings for her.

A pain stabs my left temple and I press my hand against it. I don't know why, but the thought of Astrid and Skullette together in my thoughts, doesn't quite mix well together. I look to the clear blue sky, not a cloud. A Gronckle and a Monstrous Nightmare fly together. I tell Skullette we can head back if she wants. She agrees. As haul the buck together back to the village and get a reasonable price from the local butcher for the while things. I honestly think he paid more than our price because of my fight yesterday.

Walking back to my house, Toothless comes out through the front door and greets me with tentative licks on the cheek. I guess even he wants to be gentle with the fear of hurting me. Skullette leaves to go talk to her dad, so I fly with Toothless around the island after grabbing my sketchbook from my house. We pass by the Cove, and settle there until early evening. I draw Toothless poised on a rock, hanging upside down from a branch, and even a beautiful blue-green moth landing on his tail. The evening is so peaceful, I smile.

For the next week, I'm required bed rest, and minimal training so I don't overwork my muscles too much. It's just basic shooting with



Gobber, switching between him and Skullette. I rarely see Astrid, and when I do, we avoid eye-contact. She even acts like the kiss never happened. And while I am upset about it, I'm actually more grateful.

Nothing happens while I'm out for the week. My dad does send out fleets of medic ships, but he saves the war vessels that'll be sailing to Outcast Island for me. During my 'downtime' as I like to call it, I fly around the village and the woods with Toothless. My joining of the army has left little to no attention for him. And yet he still protected me when the catapults fired back on Outcast Island.

One day, we spend the entire day, flying, eating, and hanging out in the Cove. We walk and we practice tricks and aerial attacks using old tree stumps as targets. It feels good getting to spend time with my best friend.

Flying back to the village one day, we stop by Dragon Academy. Gobber had taken over in my absence, and now they're running through shooting drills. Toothless lands just outside the entrance and we walk in as Ruffnut and Tuffnut are about to shoot at a target. They miss, leaving a black circle the size of a wagon wheel on the stone wall.

"Ah! Hello Hiccup! Walking around stretching those warrior muscles, eh? Nothing stops you." Gobber says with genuine happiness.

"Uh, sure. But may I ask why I should be?" I ask.

"Oh, your dad's planning on sending out another fleet to Outcast Island. I guess he wanted to tell you, but I guess I gave it away. So act surprised when he brings it up." He says. I promise to act surprised.

"I have to admit, I've missed having you teach us at the Academy, Hiccup. Gobber just makes us run through different fighting drills, and it's really getting us tired. Meatlug especially. She's very particular." Fishlegs says.

"I'll keep that in mind, Fishlegs," I say.

I look around the arena and find what I normally would. Ruffnut and Tuffnut banging heads together, as well as their dragons. Hookfang fighting with Snotlout. Fishlegs petting Meatlug. And Astrid petting Stormfly, in an attempt to unacknowledged me. Knowing we'll have to face each other sooner or later, I walk over and tap her shoulder. She turns and I take her wrist. Surprisingly, she doesn't protest.

We hop on Toothless and fly off into the woods, down back to the cove. She's quick to hop off of Toothless and just walk around the water. I get off and walk slowly up to her, like I learned how to with prey from Skullette. We don't say anything for a while, instead, we walk around the cove, listening to the birds, and the clicking of insects. Finally, the silence annoys me.

"Astrid, we need to talk." I start.

"Obviously, if you dragged me out here." She counters.

"Look, I just want to know why you kissed me." I say.

"Isn't it obvious?!" she says with a sudden burst of anger.

"No, obviously not!" I counter back.

"I like you Hiccup! Why else would I do that?!"

"Oh, well excuse me for not figuring it out since all you've ever done is punch my arm! Repeatedly!"

"That's how I show affection!" Astrid says.

"Well it hurts! Not only that, it's confusing! Look, you still haven't answered my question as to why!" I yell.

"Yes I did! I just told you!"

"Not that 'why'. I meant, why now?! Why out of EVERY other time you could've kissed me, you chose now to do it! When I have a girlfriend?!" I'm shouting to her.

"I-I don't know! Okay?! I don't know!" she yells.

"\_That's not an answer!\_" I counter using her own words.

"What do you want from me Hiccup?!" she asks.

"I want you to \_back off\_" I say.

Her face shows confusion, hurt, and anger. "What?"

"I want you to back off! So what, now that I have a girlfriend you suddenly like me?! Is that it?!"

"I-I-. . ."

"Don't you understand how long I've waited for you, Astrid? Do you?!" I ask.

She tells me with an almost imperceptible shake of her head. "Can't you see I've wasted years of my life chasing after you? Even after I had saved the village, even after you kissed me, you never showed me you cared."

"I cared plenty!" she snaps back.

"Not enough to become a couple! And it's not like I'm begging for it, it's just, you had your chances, Astrid! You had all of those years, and you choose now, to like me?!"

"It's not that simple Hiccup!"

"I know it probably isn't, but I don't want you interfering with my relationship! Do you understand?!"

She's quiet, and I can see a reflection in her blue eyes. After all that, I try to calm my voice. "Look Astrid, I won't deny, I've liked you for awhile. But you never even gave me a chance. All of those

kisses, while well enjoyed, they felt like nothing more than, rewards. I mean, we never held hands, we never went on a date. I've been waiting for that for so long. And you never gave it to me. And now, I have Skullette,"

Just the mention of her name I can see Astrid clench her fists and tighten her jaw. "I'm not saying we can't be friends, but, I just can't afford to kiss you without my feelings getting jumbled. You make me feel, confused. And I don't need that right now. I'm sorry, but I just feel like, you'll bottle me up all over again."

Astrid's facial expression softens, and I think she finally understands now. That I'm not totally shutting her out of my life, that we can still be friends. "So where do we go from here?" I hear her ask. Her voice caught at the end of her question. I look up and she's staring at me with those blue eyes. Which I now see, have a touch of pure innocence.

"I'm not saying you don't still have a chance, I'll admit, you do," she steps closer, with a slight hopeful expression. "But not while I'm with Skullette. It'll just be too confusing."

Her shoulders drop, she's admitted defeat, and while she tries to sound strong, when she talks, her voice, squeaks, "Okay."

Astrid, who I've never seen cry, has tears in her eyes. To keep them from spilling over, I walk over, gently cradle her hand, and press my lips to hers. She tastes of honeysuckle and sea water. A strange taste for such a gentle kiss. I'm the first to pull away, and when I do, she gives me a wry smile.

"Goodbye, Astrid."

"Bye Hiccup."

With that, I hop on Toothless and fly off to, anywhere. I'm not concerned with leaving Astrid in the woods. She knows them as well as I do. Plus, the ride back together would be too awkward. We need to be alone. As Toothless and I ride through the clouds, it wasn't until a cold breeze braises my cheek that something feels off. Out of nowhere, tears begin to pour down m cheeks. I wipe my eyes, but more keep coming, like a waterfall. My knuckles too, are also white, from holding too tight, and my jaw clenched.

When I release them one by one, it's liked I had knocked down a mental wall that had been put up to prevent me from falling apart. But now, there's nothing. I swallow hard and my throat tightens. And that's when I start crying. As the tears come out, so does every emotion I've held in. From the loss of the patients in the hospital, to fighting with Astrid, to even back when I had fought with my dad.

Everything that I've withheld for the past, years. My diaphragm begins to hurt, since I'm constantly gasping for breath between sobs. I clutch my middle to dull the pain. Some weird sound comes out of me. Part crying, part singing. Giving voice to my despair. I lean forward, my elbows leaning on the handles off Toothless's saddle, my head braced between my fists. There's no stopping my tears now. And the sobs. And the cries.

Toothless's ear tickles me elbow, and I know he's trying to get my attention. But I just brush him away, and he knows. He has to take control. There's no way I can steer in my condition. He must know not to take me home, because he steers himself around mountains, turns when required, and then lands in some area of the woods I'm unfamiliar to. I lazily get off, my legs feeling weak, and practically half-crawl, half-drag my body until my back's pressed against a tree.

I pull my knees into my chest, and my head is still braced between my hands. Even when my sobbing has ceased, I wait until my eyes are normal, and when my nose is only fairly congested. There's some cracking in the woods, but I don't move. If a pack of wild dogs were to attack right now, the chances of me scaling up a tree before their teeth impale my flesh are slim to none.

The rustling gets louder, and while Toothless stands, ready to attack, I stay as motionless at the tree behind my back. Two Vikings break through the foliage. Mulch and Bucket. Toothless relaxes and so do my muscles.

"Oh, hello Hiccup. Mr. Dragon Conqueror." Mulch jokes and I give him a weak smile.

"What's a matter Hiccup? Did the cod we gave you spoiled?" Bucket asks.

"Uh, Bucket, why don't you go and collect some berries." Mulch suggests.

"What kind, Mulch?"

"Anyone, just not the blue ones." Mulch reminds him. And with that, Bucket disappears into a gathering of greens.

"Okay, you've got thirty seconds before he comes back, so what's up?" I ask.

"I think the real question is, what's up with you?" Mulch retorts.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about, Mulch." I defend.

"Oh don't you?" his finger catches a stray tear from my chin.

There's rustling and Bucket returns asking what color was he not supposed to get. Mulch repeats his answer and he's gone again.

"Now, what's wrong?" he asks.

I take a deep breath, "Just, everything."

"Care to be more specific?"

"It's this whole, Dragon Conqueror thing. Already I've lost lives. I couldn't protect those patients. And now they've paid the price." Fresh tears fill my eyes and blur my vision. "I don't know if I can do this, and I'm just getting started."

"No one said this would be easy, Hiccup. And it doesn't make you a bad person if you cry. Everyone cries."

"It's bad if I do." I say.

"And why's that?" Mulch counters.

"Because," I spring to my feet. "I'm supposed to be 'The Dragon Conqueror'. I'm supposed to be the face of Berk. And just how would it look, if the mighty 'warrior hero' cried after his first day in battle?! I shouldn't have even joined the war."

Mulch gets up and walks over and places a hand on my shoulder, "Hiccup, I know you're under a lot of pressure. But I have to tell ya', you're handling this a lot better, than anyone ever expected. And frankly, I'd be worried if you didn't cry. If you weren't sad."

I look to him in confusion, "You have a strong heart Hiccup. And that's something that no one can ever break."

"But I'm still weak since I cried. Some role model I'll be in the future."

"I don't think you're crying because you're weak, Hiccup. It's because you've been strong for too long." He says.

I look to him and he has a soft smile on his face. "But, I've only been in one battle."

"Not just that, the war with dragons, and probably several other things as well. Don't give up too soon." I crack a smile.

As soon as Bucket returns, they both leave to head back to the animal farm. I fly back home with Toothless not long after. It's around late evening when we arrive. I greet my dad whose home with Gobber, and just head upstairs. I throw myself in bed both physically and emotionally exhausted, and try to sleep as best I can.

In the morning, I don't have the time or energy to nurse my wounded feelings. But I strangely have a brief feeling of happiness. The sensation's so unexpected and sweet, I cling to it, if only for a few moments. I'm roused at dawn once again, slap on my Dragon Conqueror uniform, and head down to the docks for takeoff.

While we're surrounded by clouds, I rekindle that old feeling of joy and freedom I had whenever I went flying. It's rejuvenating.

It's the only pleasure I have to hold onto before the gritty sand, and the ominous mountains demand a return to reality.

## 9. Chapter 9

We're posted in a camp a good walk away from the old village that had the hospital. It's around late afternoon, soon to be evening. This time my dad was able to get Goathy to come along to for first aid and treatments for the wounded. I was more than happy at letting her join us, we respect each other, and it's the least my father owes me for bringing Mildew along, once again.

If I were to walk to the old abandoned village, it'd be a good hour, there and back. Gobber and a handful of other Vikings gather together a fire and our food. I manage to negotiate with my dad to let me go hunting, alone. But before I go, I gather a handful of berries, a leg from a rabbit, and a canteen of water.

I wander around the woods for a few minutes, before a crack behind me forces me to turn. Only to find I've startled a rabbit. He's my first kill today. I don't worry about gathering a big load. With the other Vikings, and the provisions we brought long with us, we'll be fine. Once I skin and gut the thing, I stuff it in my burlap sack and walk around, lazily, and once I reach an outcropping of rocks, I sit quietly. The flow of the river is soothing, and the birds dominate the woods with their songs.

The summer's still scorching hot, but I can feel the shift in the wind currents. Autumn will be approaching soon. I hug my legs and rest my chin on my knees. My muscles are clenched tight, and when I release them, they all have that feel of pins and needles poking me from within. For the next few minutes, I alternate between walking and jogging in an attempt to get the flow back into them.

My walk has taken me to the edge of the old village. My stomach knots and I feel the urge to turn and run. But somehow my muscles move forward against my will. I stop and stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the black leather. Almost nothing remains of the hospital, the village. The place was obviously already abandoned before our soldiers even set up here, but I still feel like I had destroyed someone's home. Maybe I did. Maybe it was someone's home. For the wounded it was. It was their last stop before the hospital collapsed.

I'm in the middle of the hospital warehouse when I realize I'm crouched down, elbows on my thighs, my head braced between my hands. Thank Thor no one's here. I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown. Even if I had company, I wouldn't want anyone to join me. Not even Skullette. Some walks you have to talk alone.

There's been next to no rain to disturb the piles of ash left by the attack. They shift here and there, in reaction to my footsteps. No breeze to scatter them. I keep my eyes on what I remember as the road. I wasn't careful and walked right into a rock. Only it wasn't a rock - it was someone's skull. Left behind since the raid, forgotten. Someone's going to have an incomplete body at a burial.

The thing rolled over and over and landed face up, and for a long time I couldn't stop looking at its teeth. I walk through some parts that I had not yet seen due to my special protection and limited time. But it's a bad choice. It's full of the remains of those who tried to flee. Some were incinerated completely, others probably as - assumed - overcome with smoke, escaped the worst of the flames and now lie reeking in various stages of decomposition. Carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. It surprises me that there are still this many bodies left here to rot. Even after the week that had passed.

As I'm passing an old bakery, I notice something lodged into one of the walls on the front porch. A knife. Still in good condition apart from the pommel being partially singed. I wedge it free and examine

it. It's a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things.

A sound in the distance gets my attention. At first it sounded like one of Toothless's plasma attacks since it sounded so quiet. But when I hear another one sound, there's a distinction that I know it's not Toothless. I do a 360 degree turn until my eyes find a small cloud of smoke in the distance. My heart skips a beat. \_No, no please\_ I pray to Thor. But another explosion crushes my hopes.

I lunge forward. Running. Sprinting. Away from the square of the abandoned village and toward the campsite. I forget where I am or what lies ahead, only knowing I must reach the campsite. Reach her, and protect her. I run wildly in the direction of the smoke, heedless of danger, ripping through leaves and branches, through anything that keeps me from reaching her. Them.

Screams. I soon hear them as the world suddenly transforms into flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer, and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. The heat is horrible. But even worse than that, is the suffocating smoke. I pull my hood over my head and pull out the cape from my belt and attach it to the hooks.

Up ahead I can see a branch about to fall and block my path. I sprint into a crook of the trees and pull my cape up over my body. I'm expecting the worse, but only feel a little tickling sensation. I crawl out and spring up and bolt forward again. I know my cape is on fire, but I don't stop to rip it off and stamp out the flames. I just keep moving, knowing it'll dissipate on its own. Enough so that I can stomp it later. And as long as my hood is fine, so will I be.

I pull the collar of my uniform up over my nose, shocked but relieved to find it soaked with sweat, giving me a thin veil of protection against the flames. As I'm running I'm choking, my face is getting cut by the branches that materialize from the haze without any warning. I hurdle over a burning log. And soon my nose and throat are burning. It feels as if my intestines are really getting baked. The coughing begins soon after. \_I've got to be getting close\_

The air suddenly feels cleaner, but ever so slightly. I break through some foliage and find our entire campsite ablaze. I can't tell if it was man-made, but my eyes are desperately searching for my dad, Skullette, Gobber, Astrid. Anyone. By now my cape's probably blown out, and I focus my full attention on what's ahead of me.

There are people running in every direction in an attempt to get away from the circle of flames. It's as if everything's happening at once. Several Vikings try to fend off the Outcasts that I soon see, while others fly on dragons to stop the fire from spreading anywhere else in the woods. I try to listen to the sound of my dad's voice over the roar. I manage to catch a faint yell. An order, and then he's calling for me.

My feet rush in an attempt to help him, but I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. The knife that comes whizzing at me ricochets off my bow - just like Gobber had thrown at me - and lands blade first in the ground. I turn, drawing back the bowstring

and send an arrow straight at an Outcast's heart. He turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, but the point punctures his upper left arm. Unfortunately, he throws with his right. I can tell as he's ten yards away, running toward me, his sausage hand clutching half-dozen knives. Fortunately he slows down for a few moments, having to pull the arrow from his arm, take in the severity of the wound.

That simple delay and distraction earned him the arrow that I lodged into his neck. He falls, the knives scattering across the dirt. I'd stop to gather them, but I still need to find my dad. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as I learned how to from Skullette. I listen for my dad once again, and I can hear him still calling for me, only his voice has more panic than usual. I try to call, only to find my throat like sandpaper and my voice hoarse. I'm on my own. I need to get to my dad another way.

Toothless hasn't been seen, and my anxiety grows. As I turn to head in the opposite direction, ready to fire again, a random knife catches me in the forehead. It slices right above my left eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, and filling my mouth with the metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward but still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. But I know it will miss.

Suddenly, cold fingers lock around my throat. I feel the wind get knocked out of me as a searing pain soared through my spine, and I realize I'm pinned against the trunk of an oak tree. I open my eyes and it takes me a second to realize I'm staring into the eyes of Savage. His mustache has bits of blood dotted on it, his eyes are full of loathing, and his breath reeks of old meat and molded yak milk.

"Well, nice to see you again Hiccup. Alvin's been expecting you." He says, baring a smile that had several missing teeth.

"No he hasn't. He's not that smart." I counter.

I'm not worried he'll kill me just yet. He and I both know that Alvin wants me alive, or else he won't be able to train dragons. But I can tell Savage wants to savor the moment. Even feels he has time.

"Well, I should give him more credit. He knew this fire would draw you in. Or at least smoke you out if you were present."

"Oh, too predictable" I snarl. When I manage to moisten my throat enough with my saliva, I scream at the top of my lungs, "Dad!"

Savage jams his fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. But his head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment he's at least considering someone heard me. Since my dad doesn't appear to save me, he turns back to me.

"You little liar," he says with a grin. "No one can hear you now."

I'm struggling to break his grip, but he's still too strong for me, even with my training. His lock too tight on me. "I promised Alvin



I'd give you a good welcoming before taking you to him. And don't worry, you'll still be alive, but just barely."

He carelessly wipes the blood from my wound with just his thumb. For a moment, he surveys my face, as if he's deciding on where to start first. I attempt to bite his hand, but his grip tightens on my throat, and I get so caught up in fighting for air that I stop. I clamp my teeth together as he readies a dainty looking knife with a cruel, curved blade.

"So you're going to chop me up, and then give me to Alvin? Smart. Real, smart." I choke in a mocking tone.

"As long as you're alive, Alvin will be pleased nonetheless." He says as he teasingly traces my cheek with the tip of the blade. "Want to blow your girlfriends one last kiss?" I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in his face. He flushes with rage.

I won't close my eyes. That comment has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare him down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, but I will stare him down, I will not cry out, I will not beg for mercy, I will die, in my own small way, undefeated. I brace myself for the agony about to come. But as I feel the tip open the first cut at my lip, some great force yanks Savage from my body and then he's screaming. I'm dropped to the forest floor, to stunned at first, too unable to process what just happened.

Has my dad come to my rescue after all? Is it Gobber? But when I manage to push myself up, I see a black thing hovering over Savage. Once my eyes get into focus, I see it's Toothless. He has Savage imprisoned in his legs. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that. Teeth bared in hatred. Eyes with thin slits.

I manage to pull myself to my feet and after Toothless carelessly and unceremoniously picks up Savage by the feet like a rag doll, and chucks him a few yards away, I hold onto his head for support since the world's still divided into three's. We're walking a few paces a minutes, as Toothless uses his wing to protect me. When I manage to focus my eyes, I stand on my own and ready an arrow in my bow.

As we're looking to find my dad, suddenly a bludgeon whacks Toothless in the face and he's stunned. Within seconds, he's wrapped in rope and I'm pushed back onto the dirt ground.

"Toothless!" I scream as Outcast after Outcast dog-pile on him. Pinning him to the ground.

I get up to try and help him, but the minute I'm on my feet, as my fingers have just closed on the feathers of an arrow, another bludgeon smashes into the side of my head. The next thing I know, I'm on my back in the dirt again, a terrible pain in my left temple. Combine that with the gash on above my eyebrow, and together they make a harmony of pain.

Something's wrong with my eyes. My vision blurs in and out of focus as I strain to make the millions of purple clouds floating up in the sky into one. It's hard to breathe and I realize an Outcast is sitting on my chest, pinning me at the shoulders with his

knees.

There's a stab in my left forearm. I try to jerk away but I'm still too incapacitated. The Outcast is digging something, I guess the point of his knife, into my flesh, twisting it around. There's an excruciating ripping sensation and warmth runs down my arms filling my palm. Probably doing irreparable damage to veins and arteries.

Suddenly, I'm able to breathe again. But I still don't move. My eyes shut, blocking out the inconsistent world, as I try to make sense of my situation. I hear the infuriated roar of Toothless. Then there's the sound of shouting men and their voices get very distant very quick. I know Toothless is probably throwing them yards away from me. I force my eyes to open, and thankfully the world has settled. There's the sound of heavy footprints coming, not trying to conceal their whereabouts.

"Hiccup!"

"Hiccup!" I hear it call. It takes me a few seconds to decipher that it's my dad.

I pull myself to my feet, but the world takes an alarming spin, and I have to put all of my strength into fighting against the urge to vomit. There's another roar from Toothless and he's by my side as I'm about to take a hard fall that would've knocked me out cold. My hands feel around so I know they're resting on his forehead. Flying away is out of the option. Not in my condition. But I need to find Skullette and the others, and get us all somewhere safe.

As I'm trying to keep up with Toothless, there's a call from behind me, and suddenly a flaming log hurdles at us. I'm forced to push myself off of Toothless so I'm heading right and he springs left. The impact of the hard-packed earth knocks the wind out of me. But something else catches my senses. There's that same tickling sensation I had before. When my cape caught fire. My eyes fly open and I spring to my feet, trying my best to ignore the tilting world. The sensation is stronger, like people are actually, annoyingly poking at my back.

"\_Hiccup!"\_ a feminine voice shrieks. I can't decide if it was Skullette or Astrid. But I turn around until I'm facing the crowd of Vikings and Outcasts. My hood is still up, and while I'm expecting smoke, there's nothing coming out from behind me.

I look ahead, and everything has stopped. Like I'm frozen in time. They stare in 'aw' and amazement. It wasn't until I catch myself in the reflection of a metal shield that I see it. And I'm floored at how I look. In the deepening twilight of the day, there's fire on my back. And it illuminates my face. I have a trail of fire flowing off my cape. It's as if I'm completely engulfed in tongues of fire.

The creature standing before the crowd isn't me. I can't be me. It's come from another world. A world where a dragons' fire is used for power and for show. The slightest motion and the flames exaggerate my every move.

I'm not cute. I'm not handsome. I'm as radiant as the sun.

My body hesitates to step forward, but I know I can. Now that I look like this, the Outcasts will want to run. I can see my green eyes stand out from the flames. Thankfully the adrenaline rush from the flaming costume has subdued the pain from my arm, for now. I'll pay for it later. But for now, I allow myself to feel empowered. I put a grip on my bow and as I ready an arrow, over half of the Outcasts flee from me. Those who stay behind, struggle to stand their ground. Savage being one of them.

He readies himself with a sword, but as if on cue, Hookfang lands behind me and I lower my bow. Hookfang roars and the number of Outcasts dwindles. I walk forward and whatever bits of fire fly off my cape land on Hookfang and he ignites himself. I can feel and see and orange blaze behind me. A Deadly Nadder swoops down and after it zooms past me, it lands next to Hookfang. My face is stern and strong, and I can tell they fear me. I slowly bring my bow up and pull back the string. But before I even fully pull it back, all of the Outcasts, including Savage run for the hills.

The other Vikings cheer in victory and punch the air with their weapons. The adrenaline drains, and the pain resurfaces. The world takes an unexpected spin. Without warning, I double over and begin to convulse. I vomit up blood and an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose. I stand there weak and sweaty as my body desperately tries to rid itself of the poisons I've been inhaling. I convulse until I'm sure there's absolutely nothing left.

I'm about to crash to the ground, but Toothless is under me in the blink of an eye. I don't even have the strength to hold onto him. It's like his skin has been soaked in soap, and my fingers slip. While he constantly tries to keep me up, finally, my dad rushes over and picks me up just like before.

He's careful about how he carries me and he double-checks his pace to make sure I don't vomit on his shirt again. I close my eyes in an attempt to drown out the world. Dad doesn't have to worry me messing up his uniform. I have nothing left. I can hear the shuffle of boots and weapons as Vikings try to clean up the campsite. There's the sizzling sound of singed bark and dirt. The light shifts and I open my eyes to find myself in a tent. A large tent with a circular opening. Goathy gets to work treating my wounds.

I watch whenever I can to see how this woman operates. She pours water from a pitcher into a basin while ordering my dad to pull a series of remedies from her medicine trunk. Dried herbs and tinctures and homemade bottles. I try and watch her bony hands, the long, fingers crumbling this, adding drops of that into the basin. Soaking a cloth in the hot liquid as she gives dad instructions to prepare the next brew.

In the midst, I hear my dad whisper quietly since he probably thinks I'm out cold. "Can you save him?"

She says nothing. Doesn't even write in the dirt, and just wrings out a cloth and holds it in the air to cool somewhat. I'm not sure if she knows I'm awake, and I'm no doctor, but shouldn't they be trying to keep me awake? With all of the blood I lost " which could easily be at least three pints " if I fall asleep, I could never wake up. Am I really a goner? Not if I can still think. But that's not enough for

my dad. I want to move, just to show my dad I'm okay, but the slightest movement sends a stab of fresh pain through my joints.

"Don't worry," says Gobber. "Remember, she's healed plenty of our wounded. He's in good hands."

Ever so gently, she begins to clean the mutilated flesh that was my arm, then moving to my forehead which is clearly not a priority. She dabs here and there until she removes most of the blood. Enough so that she can start to heal my arm, even though I'm sure we both know the damage is irreparable. But I trust she'll do what she can. I hear Skullette arrive, breathless and flushed, her hair sweaty. Wordlessly she sits next to me, takes my hand, and holds it against her lips. I don't think Goathy even acknowledged her.

She's gone into that special zone that includes only herself and the patient, and occasionally my dad. Even in her expert hands, it takes a long time to clean my wounds. The smoke and fire irritated it and even dried it to my skin. Goathy tries to moisten them enough so that she can clean them without causing so much pain on me. I tended to slip in and out of a fuzzy daze. Unaware of what's going on or if they're still working on me. There are other soldiers too who need treatment, but I guess being the chief's on, I'm the main focus.

When she gets to work nursing my arm, I can feel her carefully arrange what shredded skin can be saved, apply a salve and a light bandage. The slightest tug on my arm's skin brings tears to my eyes; and I pray to her to just cut it all off. But I know she wants to salvage as much as possible. As the blood clears, the air seeps into the wound. It feels fine, but the way it feels, it's like there's a hole right through my arm. I pray to Thor that Savage's knife didn't cut all the way through, but it feels like it did.

Now I'm praying that I'll go unconscious again, but apparently it's too much to ask for. As the final bandages are being placed, a moan escapes my lips. Skullette strokes my hair and whispers something while Goathy goes through her meager store of painkillers. Some of them are hard to come by, expensive, and always in demand. I'm pretty sure she gets most of them from Trader Johan. Goathy has to save the strongest for the worst pain, but what is the worst pain? Goathy tries to save them for those who are actually in the process of dying, to ease them out of the world.

Since I'm regaining consciousness, they decide on an herbal concoction I can take by mouth. "That won't be enough," I hear Astrid say. Her presence surprises me. I didn't even hear, let alone feel her walk in. "That won't be enough. That will barely knock out a headache."

"We'll combine it with sleep syrup, Astrid, and he'll manage it." Gobber says, though I'm pretty sure he's translating what Goathy's writing. "The herbs are more for the inflammation-" Gobber beings calmly.

"Just give him the medicine!" she screams at her. "Give it to him! Who are you, anyway, to decide how much pain he can stand?!"

I begin stirring at her voice, trying to reach her, mostly to tell

her to stop. The movement causes fresh blood to stain the bandages. And an agonized sound comes from my mouth.

"Take her out." Gobber orders. I flutter my eyes open as best I can, only to see Tuffnut and Snotlout literally carry Astrid from the tent while she shouts obscenities at Goathy. I know they have to pin her to something until she stops fighting. While I lie there, I can hear sobbing, I can imagine tears squeezing out of her eyes. Was she like this when I was our cold after defeating the Green Death? Was she like this when I got struck by that lightning one day in the village?

For a while, I doze off. Allowing Goathy to finish with me as best she can, then go on treating the other Vikings. A rustling of the tent flap gets my attention, and while my eyes aren't fully open, I can make out a few figures. One being my dad. There's the sound of glass bottles clinking together in a crate.

Suddenly, the pain, out of nowhere, multiplies by ten, twenty, forty. I can feel my muscles tense, but that makes it worse. My teeth naturally grit together and I can feel my back and my forehead moisten with sweat. Whatever Goathy gave me, Astrid was right. It isn't enough. I listen to the commotion and try to translate what's happening.

It sounds like Goathy fills a syringe with one of the liquids from those bottles, and shoots it into my arm. Almost immediately, everything relaxes. I can feel the cold liquid course through my veins. I welcome it, embrace it as it spreads and germinates throughout my entire body. Once I drift away into the painkiller, everything seems to deflate. Once I feel the coldness of the drug snake up my spine, until I'm sure it's leaked into my brain. Then I begin to drift deeper.

Something must be weird with the drug, because my dreams aren't dreams at all. They're nightmares. Horrible, gory, terrifying nightmares.

Savage, has entered my dreams now. He chases me, pins me to the ground, and pulls out his knife to cut my face. It digs deeply into my cheek, opening a gash. Suddenly Savage begins to transform, his face elongating into a snout, dark fur sprouting from his skin, his fingernails growing into long claws, but his eyes remain unchanged. He becomes this wired mutation of himself. A rat-like thing of the Outcasts that terrorizes me. Tossing back his head he lets out an eerie screech/scream. Savage begins to lap the blood flowing from my wound, each lick sending a new wave of pain through my face. I give a strangled cry and wake with a start, sweating and shivering at once.

Toothless's green eyes pop into the tent, and the moment he sees me awake, instead of tackling me, he walks in and circles me until his body is coiled around me. I lift my right arm, and his head is there, resting on my lap, protecting me from the terrors of the night, like he used to. I rest my head on his, hoping his cold scaly skin will cool me off. I feel his tongue lick my cheek and I flinch. His ears perk in shock and confusion.

"I'm sorry bud, bad dream." I say with a shaky voice. He purrs and as I lie back down, I feel him shift and when I open my eyes, I can see

his head a foot from mine. His body above my head, and his tail coiling around my still shaking body. I crave the protective feeling he gives me. His right wing hovers over me, and I can feel my muscles relax. Knowing Toothless, nothing can get passed him. And he must be my first and only visitor since no one else seems to have heard me cry out.

As I drift off, as I feel his breath on my hair, I'm suddenly thinking back to when he was the one sick from the Blue Oleander. Mildew had planted the flower out in the Plaza in an attempt to get the dragons sick enough to, potentially die. After we had, disturbingly removed the poison of a Scauldron from his butt, they made a fair recovery. I think back to when I was lying next to him in the living room of our family home. Dad was outside, looking after Tornado who had been fairly affected as well. The agony I felt when he was sick was grueling. I can't imagine how he must feel. Seeing me all bandaged and bloody.

"It's you and me bud. Until the end." I manage to say.

He nuzzles close to me and his nose feels cool against my cheek. I drift off in a matter of minutes, but not until I hear Toothless purr, as if he really understood what I had said.

Then the drugs pull me back under.

## 10. Chapter 10

The next time I surface, my head feels a little light and I there's the texture of a trap spread across my body. Everything feels fine, there's no soreness or pain. But my body feels a little stiff. I'm still largely unable to move, open my eyes, raise my head. But my right arm has regained a little motion. It flops across my body like a flipper, no something less animated, like a club. I still have no real motor coordination. The drug must've dulled all of my senses.

I tentatively lift my hand above the cover and feel across my head until I've reached a puckered scar on my temple. It's relieving and rather exciting to know Goathy's managed to close the gash and even help heal my skin. Toothless seems to have snuck out to help the others. I drift off again once I lay my head back down.

When I fully, truly awaken, I can raise my hand and my fingers can move at my command. I still feel drowsy, but better than the last time. I push myself to a sitting position and hold on to the blanket until the tent settles into focus. My left arm is bandaged, but I can see small, fresh dots of blood. I swing my arm up and rip off the bandage, and almost gag at the sight of my arm.

Apparently Goathy wasn't thinking about looks while she was patching up the gaping hole " which I was right about. Now I have a lumpy jagged scar that ripples out over a space the size of an apple. My sleeves will cover it, and even in my Dragon Conqueror uniform. Which bring my attention to something else, I'm changed back into my normal clothes. Someone must've done it, and the thought actually creeps me out.

I bend my legs back and forth until I know they have a fluid motion to them. I'm nervous about how they'll bare my weight, but when I

push myself up, they're a little wobbly, but after a few minutes of pacing, they feel steady. I'm a little hesitant about stepping outside, but I make myself push aside the tent cover and step outside.

The campground looks ten times better than the last time I saw it. The weapons have been posted on metal rack and most of the singed trees have been watered out. It wasn't until I learn from a Viking that I've been asleep or more precisely knocked out, for at least four days. I walk around the campsite, and everything seems fine.

"Hiccup!" I hear someone call. I turn and immediately find my neck wrapped up in Skullette's arms while Astrid wraps us both in a bear hug.

"Uh, girls I can't breathe." I say with a breathy laugh.

They release me and babble about how worried they were and how much I scared them. Soon I have Fishlegs, the twins, Snotlout and several other Vikings gather around me. My dad and Gobber push through the crowd and give me more hugs. I accidentally yelp in pain since my dad's thick hands squeezed the lump scar on my arm too tight. He sets me down and after a hard pat on the back from Gobber, I go back into the tent with Goathy so she can wrap fresh gauze on my scar which still tends to leak some blood. But that'll heal on its own.

After she leaves, Skullette comes in and after I get to my feet, she gives me a long kiss me on the lips. This reminds me of how much I've longed for human closeness. How longed I've wanted to kiss her again. But I feel compelled to talk to Astrid. She was the one most affected while Goathy was treating my wounds. While Skullette was barely able to keep her composure, Astrid just broke down.

Before I can even think of an excuse, Skullette tells me she has to go help Gobber gather a few provisions since most of it was burned in the fire. I don't argue, and with a kiss goodbye, she's gone again. It feels like Skullette and I haven't been spending as much time together as we'd like. Just another catastrophe that the war has unknowingly affected.

I leave to go talk to Astrid, but not before I meet up with Toothless who's been with Gobber working on some new tail designs. We walk together and I manage to catch Astrid walking into a tent posted a few paces away from me. I walk in and find her sitting cross-legged, sharpening her duel-bladed axe with a stone. She looks up to me and gives me a half smile.

"Feeling better? Mr. Dragon Conqueror?" she asks rhetorically, but there's a hint of humor.

"Oh, a little. My head still hurts, and I think Goathy accidentally put an apple in my arm." I say, with a smile. There's an awkward pause, and a pain hits my chest. Ever since our fight, we've kind of held each other at an icy distance. "Uh, listen, you want to take a walk?" I ask.

She looks up to me in surprise, but she agrees. It takes some serious convincing to get my dad to let me leave the campsite again. But knowing I'm with Astrid seems to ease his nerves. We head to the

woods after I grab my bow and arrows made my Gobber. The extra protection will be needed. While we walk, surprisingly, Astrid and I seem to keep up a good conversation.

We fly for a couple hours until we need to get back to the campsite. Once we arrive, we're called around the fire pit so dad can give us another briefing about today's mission. I can tell he's very hesitant about letting me join, but he knows now what I'm capable of, and how much I can endure.

The plan is to take the Outcasts from the inside out. We'll be attacking and decreasing their defenses from the outer wall, then storming the fort once they're numbers in men are easy targets. There's at least ten post towers bordering the outer wall of the fort. To make everything easier, we'll be numbering them off. Tower 1 will be the last stop since it's closest to the wall and has the most men all armed to the teeth. It's the tower that's also closest to the armory. Tower 10 is where we'll begin the mission then working our way up.

Debates fly back and forth on what tower I should visit. The debates surrounds around Tower 1. If I don't go, I stay alive. If I don't, I'll miss all the action and just arrive for the alleged surrender of the Outcasts. They were thinking about counting off by odds, so that I'll end up at Tower 1, but they think that I'll be useful in some of the even numbered towers. So even with all that debating, they just say they'll take me where I'm needed and if I'm strong enough. No doubt I'll be in more battles. Receive more injuries.

It'll be at least a week before we go, and I should use the time to brush up on my training. For a few days, in preparation, I fly around on Toothless practicing shooting arrows from the air. We do this twice a day for an hour, then it's off to a small deserted forest trail for running, then more shooting, then going to meetings on any updates about the plan. Every once in a while, I bargain with Gobber at letting me shoot from the ground. But apparently for this mission it's essential I learn to shoot while flying.

The remaining days go by in a whirl. I spend the rest of the week doing a brief workout each morning, then me and my squad are on the shooting range full-time in training. I practice mostly with my bow, but reserve an hour a day for specialty weapons, which means I get to use a sword, axe, spear or hammer of my choosing.

Sometimes we shoot at Outcast dummies to become familiar with the weaknesses in their protective uniforms. Unlike the wooden cutouts, for these, if you hit flesh, you're rewarded with a burst of fake blood. For me and Skullette, ours are soaked in red. It's reassuring to see just how high the overall level of accuracy is in our group.

Along with Skullette and Gobber, the squad includes five other Vikings. There's Bucket and Mulch, who add a little humor here and there. True, a blonde-haired girl around her late teen years, possibly early twenties. She's pretty fit and can hit things the rest of us can't see without a telescope. And there's a pair of twin brothers in their early twenties, named Hunter and Lucas. Hunter has short, brown straight hair, while Lucas has pitch-black hair that swoops over one eye. He constantly has to brush it out of his face, which has a boyish charm to it. Like he could be seventeen or



eighteen if you had to guess. And a look closer, I notice that Hunter has one brown eye and one blue. They don't say much, but can soot the dust off your boots at fifty yards.

On the final day before we leave to go to Tower 10, we all settle around the fire pit, roasting fish and a wild boar Skullette shot. Gobber gets into a story about the history of how he and my dad first defeated Alvin and the Outcasts. Apparently a simple teenage rivalry morphed them into what they are now. While my dad turned out fine, Alvin became the horrible Viking we know today. I didn't pay much attention to it, but I start to trace back to when Savage stabbed me in the bicep. My hand moves the apple scar on my arm.

There's a thought that keeps nagging at me. If Alvin wanted me alive, then why would Savage inflict so much damage on me? Surely by keeping me in one piece, Alvin could use the potential of hurting to blackmail my dad. But by cutting and scarring me, something else must be going on. While Savage may have said it was some form of cruel 'initiation', it just seemed weird. Am I more useful to Alvin dead than alive? It's a definite possibility.

By killing the Dragon Conqueror, Alvin will become legend. He'll be seen as unstoppable. And even if he loses against my father, with my murder in his history, he'll be feared by all more than ever. But it still feels like he can't afford to waste my life, at least without prying the information of how to train dragons out of me. But that's never going to happen.

"Why does Alvin suddenly want me dead?" I ask out loud.

"I'm sure he denies that he does," Gobber answers.

"But we know it's true," I say. "And you guys must at least have a theory."

Gobber gives me a long, hard look before my dad answers. "Here's what we assume. Alvin has never liked us. But, it all started back when the villagers were voting for a new chief of the tribe." Dad starts.

"The Village elders organized a duel between the two most eligible men in the tribe. That being you father and Alvin." Gobber interjects. "And when Alvin lost, he didn't take it too well."

\_The rest is history,\_ I think.

"And it made matters worse when you defeated him twice in the making. But even that can be overlooked in view of how well you connect with dragons." Dad adds.

"Then what is it?" I ask.

"Sometime in the near future, this war will be resolved. A new leader will be chosen," says Dad.

I roll my eyes, "Dad, no one thinks I'm going to be the leader."

"Yes they do. After all you are the chief's son, but luckily for you, the decision is optional." Dad says.

It's true too. Everyone knows that almost no one will probably listen to me if I become chief of the tribe. But knowing this, recently on Berk, we've passed a law stating that if the heir to the throne is unwilling to lead the village, he or she will pick the next best choice.

For example, say if Dad was my age, and was unwilling or unable to lead the villagers. He would then handpick the next best choice to lead Berk. That would be Gobber.

I've never given much thought as to who I would pick to lead Berk in the future. In fact, I've never really thought about it at all since I can see my Dad as chief for many years to come. And frankly, I'm unsure of what to do at all. I could lead the village, surely. But if I were to die in the war, who would take over in my place? Astrid? Skullette? Women can be chief on Berk, and they're at the top of my list.

But a scary thought hits me. If I were to die, along with my father, or even just be captured by Alvin, then he would be the ruler over Berk.

"So, even if he captured me in battle, he'd still kill me just to gain power over Berk?" The minute I say the words, I know they're true.

"He doesn't need you as a rallying point. As he pointed out, he'll take Berk for his own, and if he can't control the dragons, he'll just kill them off along with you. If you won't cooperate. Which we all know you won't." Gobber says.

"There's only one last thing you could do to add fire to the rebellion if you were ever prisoner." Dad says.

"Die," I say quietly.

"Yes. Give us a martyr to fight for," says Dad. "But that a last resort."

I peer down to the pocket where the Oleander berry is secured. It seems like no matter what way the war goes, it seems like me dying will make everything better, and/or will be my only option. If I die, the Vikings will have a reason to keep fighting if Alvin were to ever somehow rule over Berk. If I die, then the lives of those I love will be spared if we were to lose the war. If I die, Alvin will never learn the secrets of how to train dragons.

But if I live, then I will become ruler of Berk. But it's possible I'll be alone. With so many people putting their lives on the line for me, just to secure my future. I never wanted things to come to this. People dying for my safety, my future. If I really think about it, there's only one way to solve all of the problems presented. If I want to keep everyone I love alive, while staying alive myself, I'll have to surrender. But if I do that, and actually cooperate with Alvin, then Berk will still be thrown in chaos.

No matter which way I search for to get out of it, I'm led right back to, possibly my only option, I'll have to die.

My dad must see my staring at my pocket, because I feel his sturdy hand on my shoulder, "That's not going to happen, son. Not under my watch. I'm planning for you to have a long life." He promises.

"Why?" I stupidly ask since it will only bring him trouble.

"Because you're my son. And I will protect you until my last breath." he promises.

I know I should be appreciative since my Dad's willing to go out of lines for me, but really, it pains me in ways I can't explain. I'm trying to keep my dad alive, and he's trying to keep me alive. And we're both willing to die for the other's survival. If we were in battle, and one of us was about to die, one would protect the other, ultimately ending their life if it were down to that. If we mistakenly do this in combat, then the war will be over in a snap, and Alvin will have Berk.

Suddenly I'm faced with another challenge other than defeating Alvin. I need to convince my dad to let me die if the option was to arise during the war. Either that or at least stay as chief.

"They'll need you more than me, Dad." I start. "If we win, then they're more likely to listen to you than, your 'little embarrassment'." I say, trying to add humor by making fun of myself.

"But if we win, then what better way to celebrate then by crowning you as the new chief?" he counters.

"By crowning you as chief of the entire village of Berk and here." I snap back. "Besides, they're more likely to actually listen to you rather than me."

"But you're the Dragon Conqueror. If we win, then there's no way they can't listen to you."

"But I'm not a strategist. I prefer working behind the lines."

"Not if you agreed to be the Dragon Conqueror. That's a huge responsibility in of its own."

"I only agreed so that I could keep you and everyone else alive!" I shout. Everything's quiet, but I go on. "Look, I'm not fit to be a leader! No one would listen to me, and I only joined so that YOU could lead everyone if or when we win! I don't think I'm ready, and I probably never will be! So if the time comes when you have to save yourself or me, save yourself!"

Then with that, I chuck my fish â€" which was pretty much burned at this point â€" into the fire and dive into my tent and so something stupid like cry. No one comes to see me, not even Skullette, because I'm sure my words have left them all scared, speechless and second guessing their reason in even being here. Their main reason in joining the war was not only to drive off Alvin, but to protect me the minute I agreed to become a soldier. Now that I've practically ordered them to save themselves instead of me, the Dragon Conqueror, their starting to rethink of why they're even here if I'm saying they shouldn't save me.

I'm the face of the rebellion against Alvin. And if I die, then the ones I loved will be spared. Dad will be the chief of both the Outcasts and the people of Berk. And there will be eternal peace in the future. The truth I see is hard and excruciatingly painful.

My death will bring joy and happiness for the future of Berk.

## 11. Chapter 11

The next morning, I wake up and change into my normal clothing. I step out of my tent and find my dad still sitting around the fire, which has long been blown out. I walk as silently as I can, but the squeaking of my prosthetic leg gives me away. His head turns to me, and judging from the dark circles under his eyes, he's been up all night. He rises to meet me.

He doesn't say anything but looks at me up and down. My sleep wasn't very pleasant either since my eyes kept watering. And now they feel so dry, like the water has been sucked out. And I have to constantly blink in order to keep them from drying.

"Hiccup," he starts and I lift my head to meet his gaze. He opens his mouth, but as usual doesn't know what to say. "Uh, let's go for a fly."

Surprised by his offer, but not one to pass up and free fly, I accept. We fly around, and for a moment, I release all of my pain and suffering I've been holding in since the minute we arrived on Outcast Island. I relax everything and feel a sense of peace, until Dad tells us to land in a clearing in the woods or more like a dead forest. The place is so barren and dull. Full of burned, black trees and a sea of gray dirt and ash.

We land and dad leads me to the edge of a cliff, where we sit and watch as the sun has just broke in the horizon. I forgot the sunsets come late here on Outcast Island, even though it's probably only nine o'clock. While we avoid of what was said last night, he tells me that Skullette's working on a new cape for me to wear, and another cloak in case she runs out of the fabric. I make a mental note to ask her about the flammable material later.

The conversation continues and Toothless nestles next to me. As the birds begin to chirp, Dad finally brings up the conversation last night. "Listen son, I know you're under a lot of pressure with the war and being the Dragon Conqueror. But I don't want you to think that you dying is the only solution to end the war."

I don't meet his gaze, instead I stare straight ahead at the sea. "But it is." I mumble.

"No it's not. It's a last resort." He sternly says.

"But Dad," I say and I look him straight in the eye. "Everyone I care about is in danger because I showed Alvin that we could ride and train dragons. And now he won't stop until he has my secrets. And I can bet you he'll kill anyone to get to me, or if they threaten to stand in his way."

"But it's not just about Alvin is it. What about if we win?" he asks.

"I don't know, Dad. I just . . . I mean I don't really think that I'm cut out for being a leader. And I probably never will be, so that's that."

"No it's not." He places a hand on my shoulder, and I almost start crying again. Not because he's hurting me, but because he almost never does this. "Son, I understand what you're going through. I had my reservations on becoming chief too, but you'll see that it's much easier than expected."

Easier? I think back to all of the times when there was trouble on Berk. Dragons, fires, Mildew. The people relying on you for everything. Counting on you to keep them safe. Keep a roof over their heads. Giving them food on their tables every night. Since when is it ever easy?

"Since when is it ever easy?" I ask. "I mean, everyone relying in you, that's a lot of pressure."

"It is, I'll admit it. And it's never easy when you're on your own for some situations," by that he means when Mildew turns the villagers against him. "But when you see how happy and beloved you are by the people, it makes everything worthwhile."

I'm shifting through all of the good things the villagers have done for us. They gave us unlimited fish and food when they threatened to drive Toothless of the island. They were able to fight alongside Dad when Alvin invaded. They reaccepted the dragons after they saved our lives from Outcast Island.

Maybe I am over-thinking the whole chief thing. While it may seem inevitable that I will become the chief in the near future, I should be looking forward to it. For reasons I can't really explain, I guess it's just a little exciting. But the weight of the responsibility and pressure of taking care of so many people easily wins the options.

"I still don't think I'm chief material, Dad." I confess.

"Maybe not now, but with the war, maybe it'll help in its own way. Maybe it could help bring out your spirit. And offer a new challenge for you."

A challenge? My spirit? Those are some new thoughts. I could look at being the future chief as a bit of a new challenge for me. It's something new. And as for the thought on my spirit, it does make it seem like I'm strong. I never thought that Dad, of all people, would turn something negative to me, to positive. I crack my first smile since last night.

We both stand up and share a father-son hug. While dad flies back to the campsite, he says that I could come back later, but just in time for the take-off for Tower 10. Even though I'm tempted to go and fetch my bow and arrows, I stay with Toothless as we walk through the dead trees. Nothing really seems to happen except that Toothless chases after a butterfly. He looks like silly and it makes me laugh.

We fly around the forest but still stay a good distance away from the campsite. We practice a few new tricks, and bond a little more when I have to dig out a thorn that got caught in his paw when we landed. It draws out a little cry or sound more like, that I've never heard him vocalize before.

As we're walking back to the campsite, there's a sudden uneasy feeling, and when a twig snaps, our heads cock into the same direction. Only to have Mildew walk through some foliage. Toothless immediately bares his teeth in hatred. My hairs stand on end, and my face naturally morphs into a scowl.

"Oh, well hello Hiccup." He slurs, and I just continue to scowl. "Surprised to run into you out here."

"Not really, since my dad and I were the only ones who left the campsite." I snap. "What are you doing out here, anyway? I doubt anyone trusted you to gather any provisions."

This genuinely catches him by surprise. Probably because I'm not even trying to be polite. On Berk, it's basically common sense to be respectful to the elders. But Mildew lost all my respect the moment he started accusing the dragons of robbery and various treason. Now, I don't care if he's an elder, he has to earn my respect. Not I would give it to him in a million years anyway.

I've never really needed to show Mildew any respect before since his house was built so far outside of town. Gobber may mock or joke about him once in a while, but he's an adult. And when we do encounter him, I'm usually with my dad, and he does all of the talking for us. But now that we're alone, it feels so good to be rude.

"Well, that's quite the attitude there. Never thought you would have such a tone." He almost snarls.

"That's because you've never seen or talk to anyone but your stupid pet sheep." I snap

"Leave Fungus out of this." He warns.

"Why, not even he likes you. No one likes you. The most we've ever done is tolerate you. And if you weren't an elder, I swear to you I could easily convince my dad to have you executed." I threaten.

"Is that a threat?" he asks, calling my bluff.

"It's a promise." I counter. "Oh, and I want to thank you."

"For what?"

"Because you just helped me realize one good thing about me being an heir. When I am chief, I will use the power to get rid of you." I darkly say. Slowly drawing out my words so he won't miss a single one.

We don't say anything as I imagine the words sinking into that liver-spotted head of his. I notice his eyes widen ever so slightly, his pupils dilate and finally subside behind a cold wall of anger. His lip curls, a scornful expression that seems to say I've lived up to his lowest expectation of me, and steps back. I don't care what he

thinks of me. I'll even kill him on the spot to prove it.

As if he read my mind, and as if not willing to let me win this fight, he says, "Well, you've certainly changed, Hiccup."

"So have you. So has my dad." I counter.

"Oh most definitely, Hiccup. But you've changed the most, and you don't even know it." He says with an edge in his voice.

I'm about to counter, but I realize he's right. My mouth slightly opens, and when it closes, he smirks then adds, "Or do you still feel like the boy who spared his dragon in the woods?" he asks me.

I lower my head, "No." I answer.

"That's what happens when you're in the war. Messes you all up pretty good, don't you think?" Then he walks away, and I clench my fists to keep from chucking my knife at him.

But it's probably the only thing I think Mildew's right about. There's no going back. I'm not the same boy who saved Toothless in the woods. The boy who defied all odds against tradition. The boy who changed history. But I know he's in there somewhere, deep down. He's still there. So we might as well get on with things.

I decide to fly back to the campsite as the dinner bell rings in the distance. As we land, there's already a small line gathering as others start to put their weapons down and lineup. I was expecting some of the soldiers to give me some looks about what I had said, but actually they just greet me like normal and even let me cut in line. I would question their kindness, but I realize dad must've told them about our talk. So their cutting me some slack.

When I get the chefs, they pile on mounds of roasted beets, scrambled eggs, two full loaves of bread, and even a full glass of yak milk. It's obvious they're trying to please me. I give them a suspicious but grateful look. And they return it with a nervous smile. I don't know why, until I realize that they're the exact same trio of men who tied and shackled Toothless to the wooden cart when the Vikings thought he was responsible for a severe thunderstorm striking the village. Clearly they're still trying to make it up to me.

I give them a pleased half smile, and when they even offer me dessert, I decline and thank them. I'm the first to be settled down by the fire, and Toothless nestles down next to me at the end of the log.

"Mind if I join?" a soft feminine voice asks.

I smile and turn and find Skullette. "Of course 'ma lady'." I say. She giggles and sits down after giving me a kiss.

"So how've you been?" she asks.

"Okay. You?"

"Fine."

"You sure?" I ask.

She looks to me a little confused, "Huh?"

"Well, I just, wanted to know how you're doing after, what I said last night." I say.

Her shoulders drop and she gently sighs, "I . . . I mean, it was shocking, and it did scare me a little." she admits.

A pang of guilt stabs my chest. Seeing Skullette scared and sad, it pains me in ways Alvin never could hurt me. "I'm sorry." I mumble.

Skullette turns to me and cracks a smile and kisses my cheek. After that, we drop the subject and move on to her telling me all about her training as Fishlegs, Snotlout and the twins gather around the fire. Astrid never shows and when I ask, Fishlegs says she went to the woods to practice axe throwing.

I try not to think about it, but I can't help but think that whenever she's separate from the group, it's because of me and Skullette. I wonder if the way I feel when Skullette's hurt, is the same way she feels when she sees us. Another pang of guilt. I try to bury my emotions with the mounds of food I received from the chefs, but it was a big mistake. By the end of the meal, I'm fighting to keep the food down and I know I'm a little green.

I hand my plate to the chefs and thank them for the meal. I would joke with them not to give me so much next time, but I think they would take it too seriously. After gathering my bow and arrows, I hop on Toothless and we ride out over the forest until we spot the flamboyant colors of Stormfly. Not that hard to miss is a sea of gray. Toothless flies over so she knows we're here and he lands a few yards away as she chucks her duel-edged axe to the trunk of an oak.

"Wow, that tree could not be more dead." I joke, and she cracks a smile.

"How ya' feeling?" she asks as she pries the axe loose.

"Pretty good. A little excited for tomorrow." I say.

"Excited?" she asks in confusion.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know, it just seems like you're not really the kind of person who looks forward to invasions." She admits.

"I know. I thought I wasn't that kind of person either." I tell her and she turns to me. "But I guess I'm a little excited because I'm going with my dad, and you guys. Kind of like our little rescue mission to Outcast Island when we were trying to get the Book of Dragons back."

"Wasn't exactly looking forward to it." She admits.

"But you still went anyway." I remind her.



"Because it was our only chance." She counters.

"But you still managed to outsmart Alvin. Not that it would take much to do that." I joke and suddenly we're both laughing. "And you didn't even want us to shadow you from the sky when you were sailing." Her eyes shift to the side and a small smile crosses her lips. "Astrid, your strong and independent spirit is one of the things I liked about you. And it still is." I say.

She blushes and brushes her bangs out of her eyes. While Toothless and Stormfly rest by a small gathering of bare trees, Astrid and I talk about things while simultaneously chuck her axe at the oak. I teach how to handle a bow. I brought a spare one since I knew she couldn't handle the one Gobber especially made for me. To my surprise, she was pretty good at using a crossbow. But I prefer the traditional kind.

After a couple hours of this, she leaves to head back to the campsite to grab a couple of whicker baskets while I hunt for some food. She comes back late in the afternoon. I'm sitting on a log at the edge of the campsite, plucking a goose. A dozen or so of the birds are piled at my feet. Great flocks of them have been flying through here since we arrived, and the pickings are easy. Without a word, Astrid settles beside me, placing the baskets in the middle of us, and begins to relieve a bird of its feathers. We're through about half when she asks, "Any chance we'll get to eat these?"

"Yeah. Most go to the camp kitchen, but they expect me to give a couple to whoever I'm going with tonight." I say.

"Isn't the honor enough?" she asks.

"You'd think." I say. "But word easily got out that watching me is a full-time responsibility."

We pluck in silence for a while longer. My fingers give a yank, and when I go to drop them, one lands on Toothless' nose. A cloud of feathers floats down around us. Astrid pulls a feather from my hair and spins it between her thumb and forefinger. She gives a slight giggle and tickles it to my cheek. I brush her away and we continue until the birds are bare.

After we drop off the birds, we volunteered to go back to the woods to gather kindling for the evening fire. Our trip to Tower 10 is going to be under the cover of night. We're heading back and we stop for a minute since I dropped my pile after my foot caught on a rock. Astrid helps in gathering the wood, and then our hands touch as we both reach for the same last piece of wood.

We look at each other, and we hold each other's gaze. I'm the first to look away and flick my eyes to the kindling and snatch it. We continue on without a word. The whole walk back to the campsite was dead quiet. When we're a few yards from the border, Astrid stops. I turn and she's placing her gathering next to a tree.

"Astrid?" I start.

There's a moment of silence before she speaks, "Hiccup," she starts, and nervously rubs her arm. "Do you think, honestly, that if I were to have, made a move, before Skullette arrived, do you think we

might've actually, been a couple?"

My heart stops. My thoughts race for an answer. There's no real right answer to this. If I say yes, she'll think I've not gotten over her. But I really haven't, but I don't want her to know that. But if I say no, then she'll give up, and if things don't work out with Skullette, then I'll be left alone. But I can't keep leading her on, making her like my backup plan. These comments and questions fill me to the brim with pain. Because no matter what I say or do, I end up hurting her.

"Uh," I begin to put down my kindling, choosing my words carefully. "Yeah, I guess. I mean, if Skullette hadn't come along, maybe, things could've worked out." I tell her.

She tilts her head up to meet my gaze, "Is there hope in the future?"

I pause, "I don't know."

She shifts her eyes to me and sees my face. I'm showing her complete honesty, but it's still a red flag and signal that we must return to reality. She doesn't respond, but in fact she seems to crack a small smile. I'm praying it's not because she thinks she's won since yes, it is true she still has my heart. But as long as I'm with Skullette, she's far from the finish line.

The walk back was quiet and after we hand over the kindling, Dad gathers us one more time for a quick briefing, and then I'm dressed into my Dragon Conqueror suit in less than a minute. While it's necessary that we ride on horseback for this mission, Gobber will stay hidden with the dragons if we need them. Not used to riding on other animal than a dragon, it takes some adjusting, but I manage well. Toothless snarls, but I tell him it's okay.

Before I officially mount, Skullette runs up to me with my new cloak. It seems a little too big for me, especially around the hood area, but when I try it on, it conceals my entire face by casting a dark shadow. And while I hate to rearrange the uniform she made, she hands me a single leather sheath that has a mixture of my normal, fire, and explosive arrows and I strap it to my waist. This way it'll be concealed by my cloak. Same for my uniform. While I feel stupid wearing the uniform since I'll be spotted like a crocodile amongst alligators, Dad and Gobber tell me I'll need it for when we capture the Tower. So Alvin will know who is dominating him.

Great, put my face as the reason for him becoming furious. Why don't they just slap a bull's-eye on my chest and put me in a ring of fire with fiery letters saying "Shoot me here!" Sheesh.

While I'm simply hiding behind fabric, everyone else has gone under serious transformations in order to not be seen and/or recognized by the Outcasts. Skullette has braided her hair and transformed into a peasant girl with her ragged clothing and dirt marks dotted all over her body. My Dad has simply removed his chief hat and changed his clothing so he mimics a Viking from our village. He'll still easily be able to fit in amongst the Outcasts. Gobber's the only one who's stayed the same since he'll be hiding in the shadows.

I mount my horse and settle the sheath in place. Sling the bow over

my shoulder. Dad lines up to my right, Skullette on my left. Our mission is to raid the watch tower and secure it for our team. Any, surviving, Outcasts will be kept as prisoner until further notice. But before all that, we're going to do a little shopping.

It turns out the watch towers aren't what I expected. If not more than what I expected. They're not only towers, but small marketplaces filled with food, weapons and other materials provided for the Outcasts posted at the tower. Depending on what tower you're in, depends on how many weapons you get. Food and other provisions like clothing are divided evenly. The way each tower is designed is that there's a brick wall that borders the entire area of the tower. Two guards are posted by a gigantic iron gate that let's in any travelers.

The towers themselves aren't heavily guarded, other than four guards being posted. Two on the bottom and two on top. But this mission, as well as all the others, will require stealth. We can't just bust in and take the information we need, we need to be silent and swift. Otherwise, they'll warn the other towers long before we reach them. The journey to some is at least a few hours if not a day.

The dragons are to come in if the mission was to go wrong and we are spotted, and also to burn the symbol of Berk into the wall to know that this tower has been conquered. Working our way up to Tower 1, the idea of the mission is to rid the Outcasts of their weapons and needs so they'll be an easy takeover. But there's more planned for when we reach the city of the Outcasts itself. Gobber talks about smuggling in multiple barrels of explosive substances, like the stuff we use to set the catapults and arrows on fire. It's a little disturbing to know that it's the spit of Monstrous Nightmares, but highly ingenious.

We already have soldiers undercover as Outcasts, and once we infiltrate the city, and after each tower is secure, the plan is to light the entire city ablaze. Using the dragons of course and the war will officially end when I assassinate Alvin.

Dad told me a couple of nights ago. The idea is supposed to symbolize the firing of the last shot of the war. I didn't really mind, in fact I found myself anticipating the moment with pleasure. And what better way than to seek revenge and vengeance. To make sure Alvin knows the sacrifices of my people are not in vain. We plan to have me shoot him in the arena back on Berk, in front of the entire village so everyone can witness.

How the Dragon Conqueror defeated Alvin the Treacherous, and dominated the Outcasts.

We stare straight ahead at the trail we're supposed to ride, and after I exchange a glance with Skullette and my dad, with a snap of the reins, we ride off into the foggy night.

## 12. Chapter 12

The feeling of riding feels different than riding a dragon. Apart from the obvious reasons, it's a little rockier than when I ride with Toothless. All of those extreme turns and flips and twirls and loops and still I feel awkward on a horse. We ride full gallop toward Tower

10. The ride lasts at least fifty minutes. A few hours on foot.

I peer ahead and try to see as best I can through the dense fog. The pounding of the horses' hooves echoes in my head. I periodically find myself peering from side to side, as if expecting Toothless and Gobber to materialize from the fog, running alongside us. I scan the rest of the group, and Dad and Skullette match my pace while Mulch and Bucket ride behind us, and Hunter and Lucas take over the sides.

Suddenly I'm flashing back to when I was in the arena. And we had paired off in pairs, prowling through the fog of a Zippleback's gas, learning what head we need to douse with water so it couldn't light its fire. Snotlout and Tuffnut had tossed their buckets at Astrid and Ruffnut thinking they were the dragon. Smoke, fog, mist. Things that can be good and bad. Shadows you from the enemy. But on wrong move, and you've just killed you ally.

Soon the shadow of an iron gate forms in the fog. I'm the first to slow to a trot. The others follow and I pull my hood up over my head as Dad rides ahead to consult to the guards. We all stop and I try to conceal my prosthetic leg, which I just realize is a major giveaway. I watch as Dad talks with a different tone to his voice. After a few glances are exchanged with the guards, they nod their heads and open the gates.

We snap our reins and the horses trot in. As I pass a guard, I sneak a peek at the guard to my left. His eyes do a double take before he realizes I'm staring. But before he gets the chance to get a closer look, the gates close behind us, sealing them to the outside. We keep the horses at a walk as we stroll through the marketplace. Which is fairly similar to The Plaza back on Berk. We ride for a couple minutes until we reach a fork in the road.

One extends to the left, the other to the right. It seems like either choice will lead us back to the original spot. But the left side looks fairly more ruff than the other. While I normally oppose, they're ruff and tuff (Oh hey, I just figured it out) for reasons. If they're more feared, then they must have better weapons. I tell Dad my theory, and he agrees. We turn the left and immediately the horses' nay in caution.

As we're walking, they continue, and I try to keep mine calm. Skullette asks a local Outcast where we are. He tells us we're in the Lower Market of the marketplace. Another Outcast says to us as we pass his booth, "You newcomers are awfully brave coming through here with those fancy horses." He says with a snaggletooth smile.

I shudder, and then I lean over to glimpse in his booth. I see several chickens hanging on a clothing line, tied by the neck. All skinned and bare. A co-worker behind him disengages one from the line, and after he sharpens a knife, I turn away just in time as I hear the man chop off the head of the dead chicken. Then there's the sickening sound as he starts to gut it clean.

Feeling sudden nausea, I snap my reins and the horse trots further down the market. Once I finally stop and breathe as best I can without gagging from the smell of unwashed bodies, stale urine and infection. Needing to walk it off, I hop down from my horse, and guide her through clenching the reins in my hand. I wrap my cloak

around myself and push into the sparse crowds still drifting stall to stall in the Lower Market, haggling over produce, rubbing linens between their fingers to check for quality.

Flicking the hood of my cloak over my head, I make sure it hides every strand of my brown hair, and my prosthetic leg that makes me so easily recognizable. Dad and the rest of my group come up by me, and my muscles slightly relax. If my cloak can't hide me, their bulk bodies will. I wrap my cloak in my fists along with the reins, so that it conceals my uniform.

Now that I think about, the Lower Market's main road leads straight to the Tower. Which our main destination. And as much as I want to just burn it and go, we need to stock up on supplies before we set fire. My heart pounds a little faster as I continue walking. I must be increasing my pace since I feel my father's hand on my shoulder and give me a small squeeze to say, "Slow down."

The first stall I reach is a trestle table laden with a few remaining crates of juicy pears and apples. Off to the side is a small gathering of thick-skinned melons. An old man with a long thin, gray beard squeezes the fruit between his fingers before loading it on a scale to weigh it. Ignoring him, I move on.

Mud puddles gouge the gritty road, courtesy of an early-afternoon rain shower. It's weird to think that while our campsite didn't receive any rain, further down south, they had a complete downpour. On Berk, being a small island, everyone experiences the same weather at the same time.

I pass a butcher, already cleaning his knives and packing away the last of his mutton, and wrinkle my nose as the rusty scent of drying sheep's blood lies heavy on the air, mingling with the smell of mud. As I begin to move on, I hear Skullette barging with the butcher. I spin around and see she's brought one of her hauls. At least three fish. I'm about to protest until I see the butcher bring forward a leg of a sheep and trade it for the fish.

I would be impressed on her trading in enemy market, but I remind myself she's dressed as a peasant. It's possible he felt pity. And I need to remind myself that we should buy something before we go. But nothing really catches my attention.

Two more stalls down, I reach a candle maker's and next to it a bakery. Close enough. I trade some coins for four candles sticks. The yeasty aroma of braided raisin loaves pierced by the sharp sweetness of cinnamon buns wraps around me and my stomach beckons for the sweet delicacy.

A middle-aged man stands alone behind amid wooden tables draped in crumb-coated white cotton and covered with trays of his baked goods. I can't help but lick my lips at the layout. The sweets were on the far left end of the table while plain and raisin loaves are to the right end.

"See anything you like?" he asks. I jerk my head up and after processing he was talking to me, I order three plain loaves, three raisin, and five cinnamon buns. He readies the order and I notice his arms are adorned in flour, stopping just below the elbow. Enemy or not, I decide to respect him for his work. I can tell he takes

passion in it. Like I do with my saddle designs for Toothless.

Once he finishes gathering everything together, he wraps them in a single checkered cloth, double-knotting it at the top. The smell of the mixed bread collides together to make a glorious smell that reminds me of home. And about my mother's home cooking. While I was too young when she passed, I could never forget how her food tasted, especially her sweet desserts. This is on way to be a little close to her in these dark times. Ironic I'm remembering my mother with enemy goods.

He hands me the order and naturally I say thank you. His face shows surprise, and for a second I'm afraid I've blown my cover. My hand flinches to my knife hidden in my cloak, but the man genuinely smiles a wide smile and says, "You're welcome."

His grim could be mistaken for a grimace, but I feel like it's the nicest thing he's ever heard. Ever. Probably and enormous kindness that never shows since it's always devoured by cruelty and greed her on Outcast Island. So I return his smile and even tell him to have a nice day. This makes him laugh and he tells me too.

After walking a few paces, I find Fishlegs is at my side, and this is the first time I notice his disguise. His hair has gone from blonde to mud brown and his clothes are a simple shirt and trousers. Not much off a difference. I feel a tap and Astrid's on my right. Her hair is down instead of it being in her normal Viking braid, and it stretches down her back and stops just as to where her spine ends.

I tuck my head down, hiding both my hair and my face beneath my hood. A man on my left is hawking a collection of hunting knives with leather sheaths. Giving his wares a cursory glance, I slide my hand beneath my cloak and run my fingers along the sheath I wear strapped to my waist. His knives are nice.

Mine is better.

Leaving my knife alone, I keep walking. The squeaking of my leg gets to me, and I keep looking from side to side, thinking everyone's staring at me. Feeling their glances through my cloak. While walking, I hear my Dad call me by 'son'. My name obviously not being an option. I hustle over to the booth he's posted at, and notice something about the caretaker. I notice the way his beard is braided, the style he wears his clothes. Similar to Gobber. Then I realize.

He's one of our undercover Vikings.

"Son, this is Oliver." Dad says. And we exchange a handshake.  
"Oliver, this is my son."

"So nice to meet you." He says, but I can tell he wants to scream my name to the heavens.

While they exchange words back and forth, I glance at his inventory of weapons. I find maces, swords, bows and arrows, knives, spears, axes, metallic objects I have no name for, even a couple tridents. Weapons, nothing but weapons.

"See anything you like?" the question repeats as Oliver discovers me

staring at his inventory. Normally I only prefer to trade with Trader Johan, but he never has a variety quite like this.

"Sure." I say. And after spending a few minutes picking out what I want, I end up with an extra bow and a second sheath of arrows, two long knives I slide into my belt, and even an awl. Well you never know.

I'm suddenly feeling uneasy, and I can feel glances from the ongoing people. I nudge my dad and I guess from a look on my face, he says goodbye to Oliver and we continue on. But the sensation doesn't go away. I know we're being followed. Whether it's because we've been found out, because of the horses or our weapons, or because we're new in the town. I know we're being followed, and if we don't lose them the mission will be ruined.

My hands drift to my bow, and my fingers trace along the string. Wanting to have an advantage, I hop on my horse and break into a trot. The moon's begun to rise, and most of the shops begin to close. We try our best to ride through the market without causing suspicion. There's a small gathering of trees by the tower. As we're riding, some noise behind me forces me to turn.

"Hey, you new around here?" a male voice asks.

"Yes." A female voice responds. And my heart drops. I turn and find Skullette's horse has been stopped and there's a lean-muscled boy propped up against it. I immediately turn my horse. And while dad says she'll be fine, and even though I know she will be, I can't turn away.

"So how about I show you around town?" he asks.

"Wow, he's good." Snotlout comments. And when I turn to shoot him a glare, he shuts up. That's a first.

"I think I'll pass." Skullette says. But as she's mounting her horse, the guy pulls her down. I notice Skullette's wearing skin tight pants. This must be what drew him in. Fury overtakes my panic and fuels me. If any boy saw her dressed like that, he won't hesitate to take what he thinks she's freely offering, and then I'll have to kill him.

"Aw, c'mon. One tour. A lovely lady like you shouldn't be walking the streets alone." He says with a sly smile.

I know his kind all too well. Womanizer. Player. Pig. Unlike Snotlout, who knows when there's a line he shouldn't step over. But this one doesn't. No manners, and doesn't know when to take 'no' for an answer.

"No. Stop." Skullette orders. But he just slides his hands down her back.

They had just reached her waist when my arrow braises his cheek and slicing off the ends of his cheek-length hair. He releases Skullette who runs over to me after I dismount my horse. I load another arrow in my bow as the boy removes his hand from his cheek, fresh blood soiling his hands.

"Leave her alone!" I shout with fury.

"And just who are you?" he asks.

I draw back the string, "Her boyfriend. And your worst nightmare. No one messes with her!" I say.

"Oh, and I suppose you're going to teach me a lesson?" he mocks, egging me on.

"Don't temp me." I darkly say, fighting the urge to release my string.

The boy draws forward a small knife, and I almost laugh at the sight of it. He's going to fight a knife with a bow. But then again, he probably won't even need to fully arm himself, if he's so confident with a simple knife, he must have backup somewhere. It doesn't matter, I can and will take them all on. Especially with my new weapons. I appear to them as if I have no fear, and no conscience.

My fingers are turning white, and since I see no one materialize from anywhere, I shoot an arrow, just missing his foot by a few centimeters. His reaction earns him a sucker punch right to the face. He crashes into the table which collapses underneath him and a crowd gathers around him. I use that cover to signal to the others, and the next thing everyone knows, I'm riding off with my group toward the tower.

No one seems to be in pursuit of us, and we leave our horses hidden well in some foliage. Fishlegs volunteers to stay behind and guard the horses while we scope the tower. I finally pull back my hood for the first time since we've arrived. It feels so good, and it takes a cold breeze to help me realize my cheeks are warm and my forehead sweaty. As I'm gathering my sheath, Skullette walks up to me, "You didn't have to do that, Hiccup." She says.

"Yes, I did. That guy was harassing you. And I'm your boyfriend I couldn't just stand by and let him talk to you and . . . touch you like that."

Skullette's quiet, and while I know she's grateful, something feels off, "What is it?" I ask.

She shifts her feet before she talks, "Well . . . I could've defended myself." She says, and I sigh.

"Well then why didn't you?" I ask.

"Well I was about to until you shot that arrow." She says.

"I was merely trying to help." I counter.

"I know." She says

"Then why are you mad?" I ask.

"Because, because you made me look helpless." She says.

"That's it?" I ask in disbelief. Is this really why she's mad? I was



only trying to help.

"You made me look helpless, like I need help." She says.

"Skullette, no one thinks of you that way. And we both know you're far from it." I state.

"But they do." She says.

"No. They think you're a peasant girl. They have no idea who you really are, and if they did, then I would've let you handle yourself." I say.

"So if I wasn't a peasant, you would've let me handle it myself." She asks.

I sigh in frustration. Fighting with a woman is like getting arrested. Everything you say can and will be used against you. "Look Skullette, I hate to sound so sexist, but if you were to take than man on instead of me, that would've aroused suspicion." I say.

"What?!" she says like I've just insulted her. And maybe I just did.

"Look around Skullette. There's almost no female Outcasts here. Things are very old-fashioned here. And if you started a fight, we'd have people eyeing us nonstop."

She's quiet again and I'm hoping she see's my point. I'm hoping by admitting I'm sounding sexist, she'll go easy on me. As if on cue, my Dad steps in and adds, "He's right Skullette. It's a hard truth, but on Outcast Island, women have no rights to fight, and if you were to strike at that boy, then we would've spotted and possibly reported."

She huffs, but then relaxes her shoulders. To make things lighter, I say, "All the more reason why Berk is the best." This manages to crack a smile.

There's a snap of a twig, and when I turn, Gobber materializes from the foliage with our dragons. I greet Toothless and he gives me several licks. Once the reunions over, Dad assigns a handful of us to secure the tower. Me, Hunter and Lucas, Astrid and Skullette. Hunter and Lucas will create a diversion, like a small fire or something, and then they'll signal to me and Skullette to climb the staircase to the top. If we encounter any guards, which we're not going to, but if we do, then we have to make sure we're not seen.

Skullette and I sneak over to the edge of the tower, then once Skullette's done checking the perimeter, we wait for Lucas and Hunter to give the signal. Although the tower seems fairly empty since the fight in the market place must've stirred up some of the guards. It's a good thirty minutes, and I'm the first to see the smoke in the horizon. An Outcast runs up to the two guards posted outside and tells them about a fire that broke out in the marketplace. The call of a mockingbird signals.

Once the guards leave, Skullette and I round up to the entrance and slip inside. We climb the first flight of stairs easily on hunter's

feet, not making a sound. When we reach the second, we hear footsteps. We both climb into separate corners, and using our legs we wedge ourselves in.

An Outcast guard casually walks down from the third floor carrying a spear. He sneezes and I guess the torch light must've casted Skullette's shadow, because as he slowly comes up since he bent over, his eyes wander to the corner where Skullette's hiding. Before he even reaches the top, I jump and slam my knees into his head knocking off his helmet and knocking him out cold.

She gives me a smile and we place the Outcast like he just fell asleep on the job. To add to the effect, Skullette lazily puts his helmet back on. We run up the next few flights not encountering anyone, but when we reach a floor with an extra room, we realize some of the information about the Outcasts is in there. We sneak to the doorway and I peek inside. There's another Outcast updating a map of the area.

I pull out a small pebble and aim it at the ink holder. Just as the Outcast was pulling out the feather pen, the pebble lands and tips the holder over, as if he had knocked it over himself. His hand is now covered in ink, and when he leaves to wash his hands, I sneak in while Skullette stands guard.

Since I'm the one with the photographic memory, I'm the best one for the job. I've just about scoured through half the archives when Skullette whispers to me, signaling the man was coming back. I gather a few scrolls and books before leaving, including a book on Alvin's warfare, a few scrolls about the Outcast's weapons, and an older version of the map of the island, but I quickly scan the updated one so I know what to add later.

Before I leave, I ruffle some scroll on a few cubby holes so they'll look normal. Then I slip out and Skullette follows me up the next few flights just as the Outcast comes back to the room. We climb the next few flights of stairs and don't encounter any other rooms or guards. The tower's at least twelve flights high. We're about halfway up when we come to a window. We see dawn fast approaching. The horses and dragons will be spotted soon. So Skullette and I rush up the next few flight.

When we reach the eleventh level, there's a wooden floor door that locks from the inside. I unlatch the lock and burst it open. The guard turns and goes over to the board expecting to see one of the colleges, but Skullette and I have already slipped out before he even turned around. He scratches his head as I slowly crawl down from the corner on the ceiling.

He sneezes and I say, "Oh, hay fever?" with my classic rhetorical tone.

"Yeah." he responds. He gasps when he sees me, but the minute he turns, an arrow sinks into his chest.

Skullette drops down and gives me a thumbs up I walk to the railing of the optic section of the tower. I signal to Dad and Gobber and that's when Toothless soars to the top and we take off once Gobber is at the top of the tower, and Skullette's safe on the ground.

Astrid, Snotlout, the twins, and Fishlegs join me as we soar over the marketplace Toothless unleashes his high-pitched scream that you always hear right before he strikes. The villagers scream and run in all directions. Unlike Alvin, I don't shoot, but instead, I do a full roundabout and head back to the tower, and after Gobber gives me the signal, the optic section of the tower is set ablaze.

Villagers scream and the Outcast soldiers try to shoot us down but the dragons easily swipe their weapons. And some of our undercover Vikings break through the crowd and take out the Outcasts.

Toothless lands on the railing of a balcony outside of the tower's optic section. The flames highlight my face and give me warm feeling since late autumn has sprung up. I was given orders to say an oath or a string of words to the Outcasts after we had conquered their tower. Everyone, villagers or Outcast soldiers are rounded up in the market square and the Outcasts soldiers are cuffed and dragged up front to see me.

They cower in fear, remembering me when my cape was on fire. When the flames of a dragon were practically at my command. Scared to see a Night Fury at my command, able to devour them with a simple snap of my fingers. I can't hear what they're saying over the cracking of the flames but I can tell they're begging for mercy.

The rest of the world recedes. There's only me staring into the fearful and pained eyes of people who want nothing more than for me to show them mercy. Although I should feel empowered, I merely feel pity on people. I don't want them to think they're in for death or unimaginable torture. I want them to think that we're here to help them. To drag them away from this poor dark palace, and give them a newer, happier life, full of light and warmth.

It's now, that I realize what they see me as. A ruthless killer who has no intention but to ruin their lives and dictate their future. Seeing to it that they have the worst possible life there ever is.

Wanting to show them my true purpose, I hop on Toothless to fly down so I'm on the ground with them. Once I'm off, I approach them.

"Hiccup! What are you doing?" Dad asks.

"Showing them who we truly are." I say.

I take one mere step and they all lean back in unison. I take a step back and raise my hands in the air

"I mean you no harm." I say.

"Yeah right. You blew up our tower! Seems like you are meaning us harm!" and Outcast soldier says.

"Hush!" Gobber orders.

"No! No their right." I say.

"What?" everyone says simultaneously.

Before I can explain, suddenly an Outcast drags forward a crossbow and aims it at my head. My Dad steps in front of me, but I push him aside.

"No! I'm not going to hide behind anyone or anything anymore! I want the people to see me for me. Not some boy who causes chaos and destruction." I say.

"Hiccup," Dad starts.

"No! Listen," I turn to the crowd. "I know I blew up your tower, and I know I'm not your favorite person, but . . ."

As I near the crowd, the man aims his crossbow at my head. I instinctively step back and raise my hands. \_Freeze\_ I tell myself. \_Not another word or move.\_

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't shoot you." He says.

I try to search for reasons, but the one thing I say catches everyone off guard. "I can't."

Naturally, the next thing that should happen is the Outcast shoots me and then there's a giant riot. But he's perplexed, trying to make sense of what I said. "I can't. That's the thing."

Suddenly I'm forming my own plan. Instead of conquering the Outcasts and leaving them homeless, we turn them against Alvin and form an alliance. Join together and take down Alvin. It really shouldn't be that hard since Alvin naturally doesn't give anyone any form of respect.

I focus my attention back onto the man. "I mean, we blew up your tower, you attacked our people. You killed us, we killed you. And we now have every reason to kill each other."

Now I'm flashing back to when I was in the arena, getting ready to battle a Monstrous Nightmare. I had dropped all my weapons and tossed my helmet to the side. Showing the dragon I'm not one of them. Not a man who wants to kill you for domination or sport.

\_I'm not one of them\_ I remember.

"I'm not one of them." I say out loud.

"What?" the man says.

"I'm not one of them." I repeat. And just like before in the arena, I throw my bow in the dirt and kick it to the man with my boot. It slides across the charcoal black dirt and comes to rest at his knees.

"Hiccup!" my dad says,

"No, Dad! No!" I say, and then I turn to the man. "I'm not the one who's going to destroy everything you love and own, and give you something so much less. I don't want you to think of me like that. I want you, all of you, to join us. Become our allies in this war. Fight against Alvin!" My voice is growing.

"You want us to betray our leader? You stupid!" the man mocks me.

"No, you're the one who's stupid." I say and this makes him aim his crossbow. I can feel the team shift behind me, but I hold up a hand to stop them. "I'm sorry. But it's true. Why do you stay with him? Why are you so loyal to him?"

The man lowers the crossbow, "Um, well I, uh. . . ."

"I mean, he doesn't respect you. He simply uses you to get what he wants. And what do you get out of it? A bad broken home, no food, and no reward."

The man is left speechless, and is now hanging on my every word. As well as the other villagers and Outcast soldiers.

"I mean, things just go around and around in a circle. You attack us, we attack you. You kill us, we kill you. But who does it benefit? Definitely not us. We care about our people enough to know when to stay out of a fight. But you're forced to fight every day. How does that make you happy?"

"You don't understand! Alvin's given those of us who have never been welcomed in society. He gave those of us who're contently shunned a home!" The man's shouts, but his voice is shaky. My words speak nothing but the truth.

"Maybe I don't understand what's happened to you, or any of you in the past," I approach the man and crouch down so our eyes are level. "But I know that this is not the way a man should treat his loyal soldiers."

The man stares at me uncomprehendingly. My voice is low and urgent. "And you and I have no fight except for the one Alvin gives you. We've never invaded you before. You've always invaded us. The only reason we're here now is so that we could, yes conqueror your towers, but also to give a new chance at life. If you haven't noticed, we've only burned down on thing out of your entire marketplace. And while it pains me to say that I've killed a man or two on this mission, I need to ask," I stare at the man, "What would Alvin have made you do?"

"He would've made us b-burn the entire village down." He utters.

"Regardless of women and children?"

"Regardless of women and children. The man repeats. Eyes watering, lip quivering.

I rise to my feet, "On Berk, we don't do that! We only defend if we have to. We spare lives! Why are we fighting each other?! With people who could've possibly been out neighbors, our friends?!"

I slowly rotate in a circle, my voice rising above the roar of the flames, "We are warriors! We are brothers! Whether you're an Outcast or Viking! We are warriors! We were made to fight, but not each other! Since when do warriors, brothers, condemn other brothers to certain death, then just stand by to kill the remains of those who

manage to survive?!"

"In fact, just before we even attacked the tower, I went and shopped and bought something from your marketplace! I met the nicest man, and when I thanked him for his service, he smiled at me. I always thought that Outcasts could never smile, and only knew how to kill and attack. But I was dead wrong. And that man, his smile was genuine, he actually appreciated my thanks. And he showed me how Outcasts are people too. And I showed him how we are raised, and how we treat each other. He made it seem like it was the most beautiful thing that anyone had ever given him! I'll never forget that face. And I even got some weapons from another man! But I never used them on anyone. I used my own weapons, made by my own people. I would never use an enemy's weapon against him."

I turn to my dad and Gobber, "But these people â€" I indicate to the wounded bodies of the men and the charred gathering of villagers in the square â€" "are not our enemy!" I whip around to the crowd. "The Vikings are not your enemy! We all have one enemy, and that's Alvin! This is our chance to put an end to this man and his power! But we need your help." My voice rings across the square, and at the end of my sentence, my voice softens so suddenly, it takes the man by surprise.

Everyone's eyes are tight on me as I reach out to the Outcast, the wounded, the villagers. "Please! Join us! My brothers!"

My words hang in the air. I look to the crowd of people. Hoping they can feel the wave of emotion and determination I feel. I'm hoping that I'll feel their spirits rise with mine.

But instead, I feel an arrow penetrate my suit, and shoot me in the chest.

### 13. Chapter 13

The air's cool with the cold front moving in. Autumn soon morphing into winter. I can smell my mother's amazing dinner of roasted salmon with potatoes tubers and seasonal berries. My favorite dinner. There's said to be an early frost coming, so training today at the Academy is cancelled. I'm cocooned in endless blankets, and while my mother brings my dinner up, Toothless lays rested against my bedside.

I think maybe I've contracted an early winter cold and I'm required to stay in bed. But I want to get out of bed since it's making my lower back hurt. Dad's downstairs with Gobber discussing some new rule about to be passed on Berk. My mother brings up my dinner on a wooden tray and sets it across my thighs. Her cooking is so well-respected around the village, and many people constantly break down our door just to get a sneak peak at what makes her meals so delicious.

I gobble the whole things down despite my mother's warnings to go slow. But who can go slowly with amazing food like this? In the past, when I was younger, I would try and replicate her work with disappointing results. Once I finish, I snuggle back down into the sheets as she strokes my cheek with her fingers. Toothless lays sprawled at her feet. I open my eyes slightly so that I can see her

face.

Her beautiful brown eyes that seem similar to chestnuts, but daintier. Her long, copper brown hair that spreads into two thick braids. Her feminine face that has an undeniable sweetness but fierce determination. And her hands. Her soft slender fingers. The skin like satin. That's what I think is the reason behind her cooking. Hands that have the power to cook amazing meals but the gentleness to comfort me when I'm consumed by terror. Hands I trust.

She ruffles her fingers through my hair as she sings me a lullaby to help me get to sleep. I press my cheek to her palm and allow myself to feel like a child. How I long for that gentle touch even though I know I can't have it, anymore.

Alone, I'm lost in my own paradise.

When I wake up, I have an unknown sense of comfort. I know it's connected to my mother and I try to hold onto it for as long as I can; but it slips away, leaving lonelier than ever. It takes me a minute to process that I'm in my bedroom at home back on Berk. But it makes things worse.

I can feel a stray tear escape my eye and roll down my cheek, but I don't stop it. I just feel it stream down my cheek and to the outside of my ear as I stare unblinkingly at the ceiling. How I wish to have her back. I close my eyes and more tears escape.

I didn't even know I was still mourning over the loss of my mother. Or maybe it's just that I need her so badly right now and she's not there to give me her soft hand. More tears. I'd hold them back, but I'm too tired, and too sore to fight. I would've broken out into a sob, but something else stops me.

My nose lifts to the air and I sniff. Is that? Yes, it is. My mother's cooking! Not dinner, but breakfast. So it must be in the morning. And it's eggs with cold yak milk and even some raspberries.

I leap out of bed and rush downstairs into the den, hoping that somehow my mother has come back and is here to help me. But when I reach the bottom of the stairs, I only see Skullette, my Dad and Gobber. Skullette's pulled out my mother's old cookbook and has a sheet of parchment in her hands. Reading it from the back, I can see it reads "Hiccup's Favorite Breakfast." Instead of feeling a pang of sorrow, I feel a stab of foolishness.

Foolish I was to believe that my mother could somehow come back to life and be there for me. Then it's replaced with anger. My dad sees me and a smile breaks out, along with the look of relief and happiness.

"Hiccup!" he says with joy. Then everyone's eyes turn to me.

"Good to see you're alright Hiccup." Gobber says, but I stay silent.

"Hey, I hope you're hungry." Skullette chimes in.

My eyebrows narrow and a scowl crosses my face. Out of my

peripherals, I can see Dads face change when he sees. He shifts, but I dash forward. I snatch up the book and yank the piece of parchment out of Skullette's hand. This motion is so sudden that she flinches and Gobber stares at me shocked.

"What are you doing with this?!" I scream out of nowhere. Everyone stays quiet. "I said what are you doing with this?!" I repeat.

Skullette's the first to speak, and despite my yelling, her voice stays calm. "Hiccup, you were sick in bed, and I wanted to cheer you up, so decided to make your favorite meal."

While I should be happy, even grateful she went to the trouble, something about her making my mother's meal rubs me the wrong way.

"Don't you touch this! Don't you ever touch this! Do you understand me?!" I scream at the top of my lungs, as if I want the whole village to hear me.

Skullette stands there, her mouth agape, eyebrows furrowed, and eyes wide. She looks like she's on the verge of crying since she doesn't know why I'm so mad when she was only trying to help. I'm suddenly very dizzy from both springing out of bed, and running over to get the book. But even worse, I feel as if I'm about to cry again. I resist the impulse to hold my head.

I know I'm going to have to give her an apology, but right now, I let my anger flow. I push through Gobber, who reached out to hold me as if I needed a support, and dash again up to my bedroom and throw myself onto bed with the book clutched close to my chest. I curl up on my side and around the cookbook, feeling the presence of my mother.

And I begin to sob.

While I know the walls aren't soundproof, it makes me feel better crying with no one around. That way I won't feel their pitiful gazes. I'm hoping that Dad and Gobber explain to Skullette on why I went psycho over the book. This was my mother's book. These were her recopies, that she made just for me. I guess I didn't want anyone else to steal her ideas. Not that Skullette would do that, but, I guess it's the only real thing I have to hold onto on being with my mother. The only real memory I have, and that I can remember. And I don't want anyone else to steal that memory. I clutch to it as hard and as tight as I can clutch the book.

I break out into sobs after sob. Burying into my pillow, letting it absorb every tear I have. I guess I must've dozed off, since the next time I awaken, it's late afternoon, and the smell has faded. The pain from mission at Tower 10 finally activates and I clutch my middle to dull the pain, but it does so little.

I'm sure everyone went home, but I still don't have the courage to face my father. But then I hear heavy footsteps come up the stairs, and before I get the chance to prepare myself, Toothless comes up and when he sees me awake, he comes up and nuzzles my cheek.

I don't hear any other movement downstairs so I assume Dad must be at



a war meeting at the Great Hall. Leaving me home alone. I look to my nightstand and notice a bowl of oatmeal along with a thing small vial filled with a green liquid. My medicine. I take a deep breath and while I find the oatmeal hard to swallow since it was cold, I force it down and the medicine not long after it. Even with the oatmeal, I can still taste it and nearly cough it all back up. But I force my stomach to hold it in.

Suddenly I feel that same cold sensation I felt when I was in Goathy's tent as she was healing me. This must be the same drug she used to help ease the immense pain I felt with my arm wound. Drowsiness quickly kicks in minutes after I take the liquid. Toothless licks my cheek and like I dreamt, he turns in a circle before lying down on the floor at the foot of my bed.

Slowly I lower myself down until I feel the pillow under my head. My eyes close; I can almost hear the monsters calling me and I'm out cold. In my dream, I'm running through a field of parchment flowers. The sky's a deep navy blue. It gives off an ominous feeling against the light brown paper field. I keep running until I trip and fall and roll on the hill. When I open my eyes, I'm still on the hill, right next to what I supposedly tripped over. Like never even rolled anywhere.

The wind whispers to me. I had found a grave brushed off the face. And it's as if I seem to know this place. I push myself up and walk on. I soon come to find a bird, closing her eyes so slowly. And she dissipates like mist. There's a distant roar and I look to the skies and see dragons, Night Furies, soaring through the gray clouds. I can see them as clear as day. I run in the direction they fly. I manage to keep up despite the blazing speed they seem to have.

My longing to join them surges through me, and I jump and idiotically flap my arms. I even close my eyes and think about growing wings. But nothing happens and I'm still running. But I will find a way, even without wings. I can feel that we're coming towards the end of the dream and I want to try and fly before it's over. \_Let me stay\_ I beg whatever orders me to wake up. I know exactly what lies beyond my sleeping refuge. The nightmare that I've build my own world to escape from.

Suddenly, I've fallen off the edge of the cliff, and I'm falling into darkness. I beg for someone, anyone to catch me. I feel a sense of panic control me. I want her to catch me, say she's here and it's all over now. I speak to the atmosphere, but no one's here and I fall into myself. This truth drives me into a near state of paranoia. I know I can stop the pain if I weal it all away.

Things morph and shape different. The ground rumbles beneath my feet. And I know I'm not in my dreamland anymore. I'm somewhere else. I can feel the presence of Outcasts before I see them. My head hurts and my chest does too. I can't turn away, but I can't give into the pain. With no weapon, I need to get away.

"\_Don't try to hide!" \_someone rings out. \_"Though they're screaming your name."\_

Things turn to worse as I turn in a circle and come face to face with the end of a brutal battle. Bloody, mutilated bodies lie on the ground. Some have weapons still lodged in them. Fallen dragons at my

feet, and voices whisper at my ear. They all come crashing down in midflight. There's nothing but death before my eyes. Alvin reins on a mountain top, Toothless's dead body sprawled across the dirt. His laugh mocks me. He has burned my paradise.

She beckons me, shall I give in?

Forsaken all I've fallen for, I rise to meet the end. But if I fall, than all is lost.

The ground vibrates and a giant crack splits between my legs. I jump to one side just as flames erupt from below.

"\_Don't look down, don't look into the eyes of the world beneath you!"\_ the voice calls. \_"You'll become their sacrifice!"\_

But something pulls me down, and I feel the flames tickle my skin. Falling in the black, slipping through the cracks. Falling to the depth, beyond worrying if I can ever go back. No one will hear me scream from the abyss.

Something feels different. Instead of feeling a burning sensation. I feel nothing. There aren't even flames anymore. There's just pitch black. When darkness falls, pain is all there is. In the distance, there's a whisper. I catch the scent of a flower. I breathe in and it gets stronger. Breathing life, I'm waking up. I'm afraid to open my eyes, afraid I'll see nothing but death and blackness. But I breathe in the scent of the sweet flower. My eyes open up.

Comatose. I feel so ragged and jaded. My while body so wrecked and moist with sweat. I'm paralyzed. Immobilized by my fear. I slowly push myself on numb arms and wipe my forehead with my blanket. Toothless is gone, and I panic. But before I can move, my head spins. I wait until everything has settled into focus. I look to my left and the book has not moved. But the sky has changed back to early morning.

Footsteps bound the stairs and Dad comes up with a glass of yak milk. "Morning son." He says.

"Morning." I utter with a dry throat.

He hands me the glass and I slowly drink it down. Even when I finish and hand it back to him, he puts it on my bedside table and he sits at the end of my bed. When he sits, it sends spikes of pain through my chest.

I wince and he asks, "Still sore?"

"A little." I say. "How long was I out?"

"Well, after we had brought you back to Berk, you were asleep on medication for about a day or two. Then after your little episode, you were out again for another day. So about three total." He finalizes.

"Was there a bad wound?" I ask.

"No. None. That arrow never even hit you. Skullette made sure to that." He confirms. Then he goes on to tell me that it wasn't the

Outcast kneeling in front of me, but someone more from the far back of the crowd. There was less a sense of penetration than feeling like I'd been struck by a sledgehammer. Or bludgeon. Everything after that was chaos riddled with shouts and screams. Then I blacked out.

I was badly bruised, but to everyone, it's a minor injury compared to what they thought had happened. I was out cold the entire trip back, and since I was unconscious, Toothless had to ride back with me on the boat. It's strangely comforting to know that I rode back with my best friend. Even if it wasn't by flying. And after my psycho episode, I was drugged apparently and I was so overloaded with different emotions on my mother, control was the last thing on my mind.

I lower my head and mumble, "I'm sorry, Dad." He turns to me and I lift my head to meet his gaze. "I had no right to yell at Skullette. It was very rude of me, and I'm sorry."

He places a gentle hand on my shoulder, "It's alright son, and I'm sorry too. I should've known that bringing out your mother's old cookbook would've had some negative effects on you; especially when you were on medication." He says.

"How's Skullette?" I ask.

He smiles, "She's fine, son. We explained everything, but you do still owe her an apology."

"I know." I agree. He doesn't have to tell me twice. Toothless blazes up the steps and throws half his body on me, licking and purring. "H-hey toothless!" I say through a laugh.

"He certainly was worried about you." Dad says as I push Toothless off me.

"Really?" I ask while wiping dragon drool off my face. "How?"

"Well he just wouldn't stop howling until we came to check on me. Glad he did too; you gave us a little scare last night." He tells. "You were sweating and breathing awkwardly. Thought you were having some reaction to the medicine."

"Well, in a way I was." I admit.

"Bit of a bad dream?" he asks

"More like an intensified, traumatizing dream." I say, and my voice catches at the end and tears sting my eyes.

My dad comes closer and encloses me in his arms, and then I totally break down. I burst into tears, and practically fall apart in his arms. I clutch his arm for dear life, as if waiting for myself to fall unconscious again, but I stay awake as the effects of the medicine have worn off. I sob uncontrollably as my dad rubs my back, and waits until I'm done. He doesn't tell me to stop, or brush me off. He lets me cry until I'm all drained.

When I am done, I struggle into an upright position. I ruffle my hair in an attempt to ease my throbbing temple. He coaxes a glass of water into me, and after I regain my breath, I blow my nose into some

tissue and wipe my eyes. I tell him all about my dream and what happened and what I saw. Even he seems surprised, as what I describe is far too disturbing and twisted for a sixteen-year-old boy. He decides to take extra caution when out on missions and while he suggests going to Goathy for a different medicine, I refuse it.

Then for the rest of the morning, up until mid-afternoon, we spend the time going through my mother's old recopies. He tells me stories of when I was little and when we were actually a happy family. Or happier, to be fair. Some tears were shed, but it truly feel like we've bonded a little and that I really do have a father. My real father that I had thought I lost after the death of my mother.

Soon Gobber comes over to collect Dad for yet another gathering at the Great Hall. When Dad asks if I want to go, while I would like to know what the plans are for me after what happened on Outcast Island, I'd really rather walk around the village. After three days of just lying in bed, I want to get outside and stretch my legs. But not after Dad coaxes a few slices of bread and an egg into me.

I dress into some clean clothes and walk outside, allowing the autumn breeze infect my nose and chill my bones. Before I head into town, I stop next door to Skullette's house after I see Chief Boggs leave for the war meeting. I walk up and am about to knock, when the door swings open, startling me. Skullette is standing behind the door, with a bow in her hands and a sheath slung over her shoulder. How she feels about seeing me varies.

"Uh, hey Skullette," I start.

"Hey Hiccup," she responds. It doesn't sound mad or robotic, especially after Dad and Gobber had explained to her about my mother. But one emotion I can sense is surprise.

"Listen Skullette, I wanted to apologize to you. What I did and sad was totally childish and stupid, and completely unnecessary. I know you were only trying to help and I'm so grateful that-"

Before I even finish my sentence, I feel her lips pres against mine, and her arms grip my shoulder. I'm taken my surprise at first, but then I slowly process and my arms wrap around her torso. She tilts her head, deepening the kiss, and I hold her cheek with one hand. As she rests her hands on my chest, we part and press our foreheads together. Her scent is infectious. And it wasn't until a breeze kicks up that I smell a familiar smell. A flower. Honeysuckle.

My eyes fly open and I move my forehead away. I stare at her in disbelief. She doesn't

look confused, but instead, it's like she can see me piece together the puzzle in my head.

She was there while I was dreaming. She was the one I heard. The voice from my dreams. Maybe she wasn't speaking exactly, or not at all. But it was her voice that I heard, the voice that pulled me out from the dark of the abyss. She was there for me even when I was out cold. She was there. She held my hand in the darkness, and pulled me out into the light. Skullette must really be the one for me if that can happen.

But then I drift to the matter that she was there. My dad said that I was sweating and breathing weird. That must've been weird to watch. And in person, watching the one you love wimp and cry for someone to help them in a dream that they can't reach.

I temporarily switch our roles. I'm the one watching her and she's sweating and breathing. Calling to someone to help. How useless and helpless I would feel. How she must've felt. I look her in the eye and lean in.

"I'm so sorry." I whisper.

She lets loose a sniff but no tears come out. She's stronger than I am, that's for sure.

With another kiss, we leave her front porch hand-in-hand. She invites me to go to the woods with her, but I have to deny since Dad gave me direct orders from Goathy to not do any harsh physical activities for at least a week. I don't disobey since the bruises seem to kill me with simple movements. So instead I walk into town to the blacksmith shop. It's probably the only place I can seek refuge.

The hearth is dead since Gobber's up in the Great Hall going over war plans with my dad. With no activity here to jumble me, I stay until it's early evening. The medicine Goathy has me on tends to make me see things. Apart from the twisted nightmare I had with Alvin, the day before I woke up to the smell of my mother's cooking, I had hallucinated that my entire floor had been transformed into a carpet of Fireworm Dragons.

I would've commented, but I'm afraid that just asking alone would earn me a trip back to bed and to the drug-induced dreamland I'm trying so hard to escape from. I don't want to switch since I'm honestly scared of what other concoctions Goathy has locked away in her trunks.

I'm about to walk into the Plaza when hear Spitelout, Snotlout's Dad, calls me over and says I'm needed in the Great Hall. I report immediately and once I enter the hall, I take a seat next to dad.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Actually, we're here to give you some news, son." Dad says.

"Well, already this doesn't sound good." I sarcastically say.

"It's not. For you." Dad says. "You see Hiccup, with your new injuries, while they may be mediocre at best, we feel that it's best that you stay here on Berk, while our soldiers go back the Outcast Island for the takeover of both Tower 9 and Tower 8."

"What?!" I exclaim springing out of my chair. "Are you serious?!"

"Hiccup . . ." Dad starts, but I cut him off.

"Look Dad, you need me to be there when you take over! I'm the Dragon Conqueror!" I argue.

"Look Hiccup, you're in no condition for combat." Dad says.

"He's right Hiccup. Those bruises will be bad for you if you're fighting an Outcast." Goober interjects.

"So let me get this straight. Just because I have a few bruises on my ribs, that means I can't go into battle, while you all ride in with only two to three/fourths of your limbs available?" I protest.

"It's not the same, Hiccup. These men have all experienced war before. They know how to handle themselves in combat when at a disadvantage." Dad explains.

"But I can't just sit here and let the Outcasts think that they've won by killing me! I need to show them I'm still alive and still fighting!" I say.

"That's why after we invade these towers, we'll bring you back into battle for the rest of the invasions." Dad says.

I'm not making a big deal out of this. It may just be two towers I'm missing. But in reality, even with the dragons as transportation, I'll be missing at least a week or two of battles and missions. If I'm gone that long, then the Outcasts will think I'm done. I will give none of them the satisfaction of them thinking they've ended me.

"Dad please, one tower. Just one! Then I'll fly back with Toothless and I'll follow through with your orders." I beckon.

"Hiccup,"

"Dad, please. I won't even have to even help with the tower. I'll just fly in after everything and just burn the insignia into the wall. Please Dad I-I can't let them think they've won. Let Alvin think he's won." I say.

"He hasn't won, Hiccup. And besides, don't you think that losing you would be a bigger disadvantage for him than you?" he asks me.

I pause and think. Could this be true? Would Alvin thinking I'm dead be better for the Vikings than the Outcasts? The only reason why he wants me is so that I can help him train dragons. My knowledge is all he wants from me. If he thinks I'm dead, will it leave him with no motive? Possibly even lead to a surrender since he lost his prize? It's definitely something to think about.

I don't reply, so Dad goes on. "If Alvin thinks you're dead, then he'll have no reason to fight us anymore, since all he wants is your knowledge of dragons. And just imagine the surprise when you suddenly emerge, all healed and strong." Dad says.

It would be an okay plan at best, if it weren't for the fact that my death has already paved the road for a possible surrender. That my 'alleged' murder has already given the Vikings a victory. It just brings me right back to thinking that dying is the only way to end the war and ensure victory. And now I'm starting to rethink this whole thing. If I emerge, then Alvin will keep trying to fight for me. But if I pretend to dead, then Alvin has lost his entire motive

for fighting the Vikings in the first place.

I can't seem to find an answer, so I agree with my dad to stay home for both missions.

The next morning, I rise with Dad to wave him off at the docks. I notice that Gobber has been left behind as well. Probably so he can chaperone me while Dad's off in combat.

"Looks like we're both missing in action, huh Gobber?" I ask with a smile. And yet I feel a little guilty since he should be aiding my father.

With Gobber, I know dad will have some form of protection. But I take notice that Chief Boggs is with Dad, so that eases my nerves. After the ships have long sailed out of sight, I return with Gobber to the house. But I only stop to pick up some charcoal pencils for the blacksmith shop. While Dad's off, I plan to update that old map I stole from Tower 10. At least with the little shop in the back of the Blacksmith shop, I know I'll have privacy.

Unfortunately, the solitude was short-lived since it only took me a mere hour to update the map, Trading routes and all. Not as time consuming as I'd hoped. So I pack a normal bow and a sheath of normal arrows and head into town. I drop off my Dragon Conqueror suit to Bertha, and head into the woods where I plan to meet Skullette. At least the stay left me with plenty of time to spend with her.

We decide to have a little picnic together in The Cove. We pack and also hunt for food and bring a few blankets. A daylong picnic with my girlfriend. I like the sound of that. We eat. We talk. We hunt. We lie in the sun. Skullette snaps a few vines off of the rocks and uses her newfound knowledge she got from Gobber to make knots, weave nets, and even inescapable baskets for catching fish. I sketch her in the sunlight, and secretly when she dozes off for a nap. We even go swimming in the water. We splash back and forth, and we even make up a game where one person has to shoot a fish in the water, only using one arrow and you get three tries. Loser has to admit something embarrassing about them.

No one comes looking for us, and by the end of the day, she's lying with her head in my lap, weaving a crown of flowers, and her feet dipped in the water. I'm simply leaning back on my hands, my dead dropped back, letting the sun burn my face. Funny thing is that I don't burn as easily as me or my dad both thought.

I hear Skullette's hands go still and I lift my head and see she's dozed off again. I let her be and fiddle with her hair while she's asleep. When twilight is closing in, I rouse her to see the sunset. It's a beautiful pink, purple, orange and yellow blaze behind the skyline of the trees. The pink is closest to the horizon, then slowly morphing into orange, yellow. The clouds are a faded purple and the trees just look black.

After the moon rises, I hop on Toothless and we ride back to the village where I tuck Skullette in and kiss her goodnight. Instead of going home, I head back to the Cove with Toothless to clean up our mess. Once that's done, we walk through the forest together. He's no more than a couple inches behind me. When he nudges my arm, I give his head a scratch.

Things seem okay until we reach a familiar section of the woods, but something feels off. I look around and his ears perk up. I take a step forward and the ground feels, softer.

"Something's not right bud." I say and he purrs in response.

I look all around and my curiosity grows. It's like I'm back in time, back in the woods when I had first shot down Toothless. I was looking at a deep rut in the ground, claw marks on trees and tree roots. It feels like that. Like I'm looking for something.

When I take a deep step and almost lose my balance, Toothless comes up behind me.

"Thanks bud." I say.

I lift my foot out of a large hole in the ground. If my whole foot can fit in there, it must be at least two and a half feet wide, but it's much bigger. I could fit my whole body in there.

"Way too big for a groundhog." I tell Toothless.

I look ahead and there are multiple holes all around. Fifteen yards away from the one by me was another one. Fifteen more yards, yet another. Putting together some rough numbers, the hole's estimated at about five-six and a half feet in diameter. My palms suddenly feel sweaty, and my instincts tell me we should be heading back, but my curiosity gets the better of me. There's a feeling that's nudging at me.

Something just wasn't adding up. As I walk further down with Toothless not far behind me, I merely trip again but catch myself on a tree. My hand feels hot on the trunk, and when I push off, my hand is covered in singed bark. I look to the tree and find a thick line slashed on to the trunk. It hit part of the branches and then part of the grass a few feet from that. But they were lined up weird. I take step back and try to align them.

I need to squint my eyes to see it, but after I take a step to my right, and line up my thumb. The singe marks make a perfect circle.

My heart sinks, and I feel my stomach turn to ice.

"Alright bud we need to get out of here." I say.

And as if on cue, the ground vibrates. It feels like a mixture of vibration and a roar. All the more reason to get out. I made the mistake of looking back and I'm frightened by what I see. But somehow I know there's much more to come. Toothless is pleading and jumping in front of me to get me to move. But I'm frozen in my place by my fear.

I see a big round head yards in front of us. I'm looking at it from the side and when it turns its head, I feel like I need to take a step back. I feel like I had just trespassed into its territory, and maybe I did.

Within the split second it takes me to realize that, the thing has



burrowed beneath the surface. Toothless screeches to get me to snap back and we bolt off running. If I had any common sense I would fly, but I turn and bolt off running. There's a roar and I run faster into a sprint. The ground vibrates.

And as I take my next step, another hole materializes out of nowhere and I plummet in. I scream and Toothless screams even louder in horror and I look up seeing his face mortified. His scream becoming more and more distant. The light of the moon fading along with his shadow.

I swerve and slide in different directions. Afraid of what could be ahead since I'm blinded by darkness. I keep expecting to land into a pit of vipers, or even worse, the flames of hell. I keep screaming as every turn surprises me.

Finally I plummet and crash into an open area at the end of the tunnel. Dirt and clay clouds float up in around me. I cough, forbidding it to enter my lungs. There's the sound of some stones - at least I hope their stones - that tumble around me. There's almost no light except for little moonlight rays that manage to break through the dirt.

"Toothless." I whisper.

There's no answer. Before I can declare that I'm totally alone, there's a rustle of stones. I freeze in place and scoot myself back until I'm pressed against the dirt wall. The space is big enough that I can stand up in it, with the ceiling still at least three feet above my head.

"Toothless." I call again, even though I know it's pointless since he can't even hear me. Let alone help fight off whatever's here.

There's a deep guttural growl. The kind of sound you make from the back of your throat. I feel the ground beneath vibrate. I can see a faint shadow in the distance. The thing turns its head and I squeeze my eyes shut tight and curl up in a ball. Hoping to make myself smaller so it can't see me. But when I reopen them, it's at least three feet from my face. My head jerks back and slams into the dirt wall. I cradle the crown of my head as everything settles into focus. And when it does, my body goes numb.

As I find myself staring into bulging milky eyes, of a Whispering Death.

## 14. Chapter 14

My first impulse is to run, but I'm trapped in a rock and a hard place, literally. I huff and puff, trying to make use of the air that seems deprived of oxygen. The dragon's nostrils flare, as if trying to catch my scent. But all I can see are the multiple rows of razor teeth. Rotating constantly, creating a rather deafening clicking sound. I wouldn't mind if it weren't so close.

The slightest movement from the dragon knocks off pebbles and dirt from its head. Its spikes on its head flick up and down as if they're portraying the dragon's next movement. Spikes are the only thing that

I can make out of the dragon since they're all over the beast's body. It leans closer as I struggle to say something. Its eyes are so close to its head that I'm drawn right to them.

It moans rather than roar. Like it's trying to get my attention. I momentarily try and gaze in its eyes to see what it needs.

"What's wrong?" I whisper. Cautious that even the slightest sound will trigger it.

I don't know anything about this dragon except on what I've read in the book. They attack from below. Their rotating teeth can penetrate through anything. And they can breathe rings of fire. But despite their reputation, they loved to be brushed! If that's the key to getting me out of here, then I'll have to try. But I don't have anything.

I reach out my hand to its snout. Suddenly the dragon roars, or more rather hisses. I flinch back and jump out of the way as it burrows through the dirt wall like parchment. I watch as it glides through the dirt effortlessly. While the Whispering Death can fly in the open air, it morally does better underground with its rows of rotating teeth. That and when underground, it's possible it can even fly faster underground than in the air. When aboveground, they're bodies spiral as a way to push them through the air.

It spirals deeper and I decide to follow. I have to push myself up with numb arms that are still recovering from the initial shock. I have to run to keep up with it. It's much faster underground than I imagined. I have to pull my collar up over my nose and use my hand to cover my eyes so I don't inhale the dry dirt clouds, and so that I don't lose sight of the dragon.

The dragon makes a sharp turn to the left, and I end up skidding. It doesn't seem to know I'm following it, or it does know and it doesn't care. Or it's leading me somewhere. I have to multitask while I stay on the dragon's tail. But I can't even get near that either with its spiraling motion and spikes that could inflict serious damage.

I have to make sure I don't lose sight of it, while avoiding inhaling any dirt, and watching out for any sudden roots or rocks that spring up out of nowhere as the Whispering Death carves its path in the dirt. I get a few scratches but other than that I seem to be doing well.

Suddenly there's a sudden burst of light that currently blinds me. As my eyes adjust, I catch the scent of soil. When my eyes fixate, I find myself in an underground cave. There were several wormholes entering and leaving the cave. Some had light in them, indicating that they lead to the surface. The place was hollowed out, so I figured this must be its home. It crawls across the dirt lined ground. Constantly moaning and hissing. And then I see a small but thick line of blood emanating from the dragon's stomach.

I slowly approach the dragon as it settles down, coiling up like a snake would. As I move toward it, it gives a deep guttural growl. I hesitate for a minute, and feel inside my vest and thank Thor I have some Dragon Nip with me. I'm not particularly sure if this is what it likes, but better I try this than fish. Seeing how it stays underground, his appetite is still unsure to me.

But he eats the nip just fine, so I leave it at that. I manage to get close enough to touch his snout, but I'm extremely cautious. This is a dragon that haunts the nightmares of several Vikings just from having an encounter with the creature. Just saying its name gives everyone a scare. Apart from Toothless, I think the Whispering Death is the only other dragon that is said to haunt the dreams of Vikings.

It's also a creature used to teach little kids a lesson. For many things really. Every Viking parent would use the legend of the Whispering Death as a way to make their children behave. I remember when I was a child, maybe about five or six years old, my father would use the legend of the Whispering Death to scare me enough to make me behave. My mother would confront and sometimes even yell at my father since I used to scare easily.

The legend goes that the Whispering Death had a sort of sense for children who disobeyed their parents. If I child had disobeyed their parents, the parents would say that the Whispering Death will come and get you and gobble you and rip you to shreds with its rotating teeth.

Obviously, my mother didn't want my father saying this to me anymore. Apart from the fact that I used to scare easily, I would take it too seriously. Anytime I didn't listen to my parents, I would avoid stepping on the ground, afraid the Whispering Death could feel my footsteps and gobble me in one gulp.

Not only that, but I guess mom thought the whole thing was too twisted in general, especially as a way of discipline for children.

And now I'm in this creature's home.

I pet the dragon's snout and it seems to be fine with me being here. As I pet its snout, and soon being scratching it under the chin, I am careful not to incapacitate it like I learned from Toothless. I can see where the blood may be coming from, possibly just a simple cut. As I keep petting the Whispering Death, I motion my other hand to its stomach and it doesn't react until I get closer to the wound.

It jerks so suddenly I fall back, startled. It growls, and I get up and inch back to it. It still let's me come close, but the dragon has its wings covering the wound, making it hard if not impossible to check the damage.

"It's okay. It's okay." I whisper to it. And I proceed closer.

I manage to touch the dragon's wing, and after we exchange a glance, I slowly pull the dragon's wing up and reveal the wound.

The cut was more of a gash, but nothing I couldn't handle. Thankfully he wasn't in any danger of bleeding to death through the wound. But it's still fair game for infections. I go to touch it, but the dragon's growl makes me stop. Obviously there was something lodged in there if a gentle touch hurts. I look around for anything I could use to help pull it loose.

The best way I can describe the damage is like a really bad splinter

on a Viking. Since I have no other tools, I'll have to use my hands. I shudder, but if I can remove the 'splinter' then I'll for sure gain his trust. The first thing I have to do it clean the wound. I pat his snout and jog over to a tunnel with moist soil.

I peek inside and can feel the water beneath my fingers. Whispering Deaths have to drink too. So I follow the tunnel, ignoring my wet knees and reach the surface. I was now in a small watering hole not too far from the Cove. It was later in the night from when I left Toothless. Most likely one in the morning. No wonder no one came looking for me, either that or they promised Toothless they'd look for me tomorrow. But knowing Toothless, he won't let them sleep until I'm found.

Not having any cloths, I strip off my shirt â€" ignoring the cold chill - and dip it into the water soaking it through. Nothing has frozen over yet, so this is a relief.

I then gather a couple of grass baskets I quickly and expertly weaved tightly together so it holds the water. I fill them both to the brim and lazily toss my soaked shirt inside and heading back under into the tunnel, being cautious so I don't spill.

The Whispering Death is still coiled together, and when I arrive back with the water his spikes perk up. I walk over and settle them down next to the dragon and wring out my shirt. I put my hand on the dragon's tail which is covering the wound so that I could move it. But when I did, another part of the dragon's snake-like body, bends and moves over the wound.

"Aw, come on bud you're killing me." I say. And the dragon vocals in reply. I decide to and convince the dragon to uncoil. While I know it feels more comfortable, I have to have it uncoil so that I can get a good view of the wound. "Come on, buddy." I coach.

The dragon moans as it begins to shift its body, "I know, I know. Don't worry you'll be okay." I assure.

Finally I have the dragon in a giant perfect circle. Its wound was just below where its wings were posted. I lean in and begin to pat the blood away. I soak and wring out my shirt repeatedly and soon the wound clears. One bucket of water is now slightly red from the blood, but I still use it.

Once I can actually see the wound, I find a small spine had been the culprit. Whether it was from a Deadly Nadder, I'm not sure. But the dragon didn't show any symptoms of being poisoned. Before I get to work on the spine, I offer the other basket of water to the dragon. He takes a good few licks, but leaves the rest.

Suddenly the coldness of the cave begins to set in and my skin is soon crawling with goosebumps. I pull out a few roots and gather them together in a pile. A big enough pile so that I won't have to keep stopping to add more wood. Before I get the chance to get to sticks to start it, the Whispering Death ignites the wood with a ring of fire.

He purrs and rests his head close to me as I sit cross-legged and being to work on the spine. It wasn't as deep as I'd thought. The process required multiple exchanges of pulling out the actual spine

and cleaning the blood that would leak through when I would move the spine. While I am extremely grossed out, my focus on helping the dragon overpowers the grossness and gives me the strength to keep pulling and cleaning.

The dragon is very patient, I'll give him that. He lets out an occasional, what I can describe as a baby dragon roar or cry whenever I would pull the spine too harshly.

"It's okay. You're going to be fine." I assure. And I make a major mental note to have my shirt cleaned repeatedly once we get back to the village.

As I'm working on the spine, my mind wanders as to what happened to Toothless after I had fallen through the hole. No doubt he went back to the village screaming and wailing. And I am afraid that everyone will think he's overreacting. But me not being with him should automatically put up a red flag for everyone.

I'm confident that either Astrid or Skullette or even Gobber will know what Toothless is trying to say. So I put aside my worry on getting home later. I could use the Whispering Death, but its spikes don't seem like the most comfortable dragon to ride, and he's in no condition to even burrow anymore.

I keep assuring the dragon he'll be fine, and when I finally have just the tip of the spine to pull out, I feel myself relax, and pull it out with one yank. The dragon yelps and jumps at the motion, but once it feels that the pain has stopped, it purrs with joy. When I manage to calm it down, I wrap the gash, which is still bleeding a little, in some leaves I had found. The bleeding will stop on its own, but this way it'll heal faster and won't bleed more if the dragon does any sudden moves.

The fire cracks and burns on until I see the moonlight fade from one of the tunnels. The Whispering Death's tail coils around me and pulls me closer.

"Whoa, whoa." I utter as I feel my back against the neck of the dragon. It purrs gratefully and I can even see a smile through all of those jagged teeth. I hang my shirt on a root sticking out, and after emptying both baskets, I use the baskets as a pillow. The dragon would occasionally nuzzle my cheek and purr. "Hey easy there big boy. I've already got a dragon."

Somehow I manage to doze off in the cold, coiled skin of the Whispering Death, because the next time I wake up, there's daylight streaming in through the tunnels. I sit up and stretch out my arms and yawn. I look to the dragon who's dozed off too. I remove the leaves and the bleeding has totally stopped.

I slowly get up to get my shirt and find it dry but a little stiff from the cold and water. Nonetheless, I pull it on and proceed to finding breakfast. The best I can do since I left my bow at home is set a few snares. I head up top and set a few using some vines I snap off from a willow tree. When I leave them to go and check on the Whispering Death, I come to find him awake. And he's already reignited the fire. I grab the grass baskets "which thankfully aren't too smashed from me sleeping" and gather more water so that I can scrub his teeth.

After checking the snares, I'm pleased already with two squirrels. I hop back down and after skinning the squirrels and gathering the water, I head up for one more trip to gather fish. I manage to break off a tree branch and use that as a spear. I only get about four fish, but I'm hoping it's enough.

Back underground, I cook the squirrel and like every other dragon, the Whispering Death gobbles the fish. After I finish one squirrel, feeling full, I give the other to the dragon. Then once again, I pull off my shirt, and soak it in water, then after getting the Whispering Death to close its gaping mouth, I begin scrubbing back and forth and up and down. Scrubbing off all of the dirt and soil and clay as best I can.

The dragon gets so relaxed he even closes his eyes as I clean his outer teeth. Getting the inner teeth is a little more challenging without a broom or mop, but the Whispering Death opens wide and almost locks its jaws in place as I scrub row after row of its razor sharp rotating teeth. The dragon closes its eyes and purrs as I clean each row of teeth.

As I'm finishing the last row of teeth, there's a sudden noise that catches both our attention. I jerk my head up to one of the holes while the Whispering Death simultaneously lifts its head and its spikes perk up. The sound vocals again, and I stand up and approach the hole.

"Hiccup!"

"Hiccup!"

\_Hiccup? \_Who's calling me? But when I hear Gobber's voice, I'm suddenly excited. I'm about to go when the Whispering Death calls from behind me.

"Oh, you. You stay here. I'll be right back." I say. The dragon purrs and I ascend to the surface. I peak my head up from a hole and I find no one.

I fully come out of the hole and suddenly I'm tackled by Toothless. I land on the ground with a \_Oof!\_ and Toothless is licking my face all over.

"Okay! Okay Bud I missed you too!" I say and I push him off.

"Hiccup!" I hear Astrid call.

"Astrid! Gobber!" I say as I notice him coming up from behind her.

She wraps me in hug, and I look to see Skullette behind her and she hugs me too.

Not too far were Fishlegs and Snotlout.

"We were so worried, Hiccup!" Skullette exclaims.

"Yeah, what happened to you?" Astrid asks.

I look to SNotlout real quick and he mouths to me, \_How do you do it?\_

"Hiccup?" Astrid asks.

"Oh well, funny thing is, after I had dropped you off at home, Toothless and I took a walk through the woods, and then we met a new dragon." I say.

"Really? What kind?" Gobber interjects.

"Oh well . . ." I start, but suddenly the ground vibrates just like before and Toothless is by my side, growling, ready.

"What's happening?!" Fishlegs asks scared.

"No, no, no, wait!" I exclaim. "Toothless!" I say trying to get his attention, but he's already hissing in a certain direction.

Suddenly, a part of the ground erupts and the Whispering Death breaks through the ground by spiraling. It roars in fury. Its mouth wide open, showing off its rotating teeth. It must've felt the vibrations of when Toothless tackled me and thought something was wrong.

"A Whispering Death." Gobber says in astonishment and possibly even fear.

Toothless growls and bares his teeth in hatred at the Whispering Death.

"No, no, no! Toothless!" I say, but he's already bolted forward and tackles the Whispering Death to the ground.

The rest of the dragon's body breaks through the surface, flailing and flopping like a fish. Toothless goes to claw at the dragon but its tail coils around his torso and flings him off just missing the trunk of a tree.

"Toothless!" I scream.

Suddenly the Whispering Death lunges forward and Astrid dodges out of the way as the dragon encloses me like a snake. At first I'm afraid that it's strangle me, but actually it gives off a deep growl and I look to find the others huddled behind Gobber. The Whispering Death was protecting me. It thought Toothless and the others were a threat.

"Oh, no, no, no. it'd okay. These are my friends." I assure.

The dragon hesitates for a minute, then out of nowhere, Toothless tackles the dragon from behind. Thankfully the dragon held itself up so it wouldn't crush me. Toothless scratches and tries to bite, and I try to tell him to stop, but even I can't hear myself over the dragon's roars.

"No Toothless stop. Please wait!" I call.

Toothless's tail whips around and smacks me in the neck and chest.

I'm flung back and feel my spine slam into a tree trunk. I fall, struggling, gasping for breath.

"Hiccup!" Astrid screams.

Soon I see Snotlout and Gobber ramming head on into the fight. By now the Whispering Death has Toothless coiled in its snake body. Toothless's wings flail and flap. He bites at the dragon, but its grip won't loosen. Fishlegs comes to my aid and helps me to my feet. The world is fuzzy, but he helps to lead me away from the fight.

"No wait, I need to stay." I tell him, but my voice sounds so slurred.

"Hiccup you can't help them like this." He says.

"But I can't just let them tear each other apart."

I turn back and find Gobber and Astrid holding Toothless back while Snotlout and the twins try to rope the Whispering Death. He turns to me and sees Fishlegs leading me away. He roars in fury and quickly tosses the twins like a pebble and spirals over to me. Fishlegs flees over to Gobber and the dragon coils around me once again. He gives off this deep hatred growl. Toothless shoves aside Astrid and Gobber, zips right past Skullette and goes for the Whispering Death.

"No! No! Stop!" I manage to break free from the Whispering Death and stand in front of Toothless. "Toothless stop!" I order. I turn to the Whispering Death. "This is my friend." The dragon turns its head slightly, as if questioning. Toothless growls and grimaces at the Whispering Death. "I-It's okay, bud."

"Hiccup, what are you doing?" Astrid asks.

I ignore her as I act as the barrier between Toothless and the Whispering Death. Both dragons growls and hiss at each other. Toothless's eyes are slits and the Whispering Death opens its mouth showing off its teeth trying to intimidate him.

"It's okay." I say. I turn to the Whispering Death. "He's a friend." The Whispering Death grimaces. Toothless bares his teeth. "Easy bud. He's hurt. You just scared him." Toothless's ears flatten back and he growls. Apparently that's no excuse. I take my hand and put it on the Whispering Death's snout. He relaxes a little, and from behind me I can hear Toothless lessen the sound of his growl.

The Whispering Death lowers his head as I stroke his scales. Toothless, cautiously approaches the dragon, but I guess he lets go a little as we both notice blood leaking from the previous wound I'd patched. Once both dragons relax, the tension seems to deflate. The Whispering Death coils up and sets his head on the ground. Toothless comes closer and even licks some of the cuts he created in the midst of the fight.

The dragon winces, but doesn't pull away. Gobber comes up behind me as I continue to stroke the Whispering Death's forehead. "You really are an amazing boy Hiccup." He tells me.

I look and see a smile on his face. And the genuine tone in his voice seems so honest and true. I smile and with the help of Snotlout,



Fishlegs and Tuffnut, we carry the Whispering Death by its head back to the village. It can still move its body on its own, but we have to carry the slack sometimes.

As we're outside the border of the village, my head begins to throb. I immediately drop my portion of the dragon unceremoniously, and place my hand on the trunk of a tree, cradling my forehead.

"Hiccup?" Skullette calls to me. Slowly approaching me. "Everything okay?" she asks.

"Does it look like he's okay?" Astrid snaps.

"Stop." I whisper to her.

"What's wrong?" Fishlegs asks.

"Suddenly I'm not feeling too good." I say. I hear Toothless and the Whispering Death perk their heads up.

"It's probably from that hit you took when you smacked into the tree." Fishlegs confirms.

"Maybe." I agree.

"Girls, take Hiccup home. We'll take the Whispering Death to the Academy and get Goathy to treat him." Gobber says.

Toothless vocals to me, "Sure bud, you can come too."

Then Astrid and Skullette each take an arm, and they be my crutches until we reach the village. Thankfully I was able to keep up with them in my condition, but as we're bounding the steps to my house, my strength fades and they both clutch me as I was about to collapse. All I remember is us ascending the steps to my bedroom, then I blacked out.

## 15. Chapter 15

It feels like every time something happens, it results in me falling unconscious. It would be nice if I could just stay awake for one simple day. Once again, I'm back in bed, and if I'm reading the sun right, it's a new day. I find my sheet pulled up to my neck, and an extra pillow under my head. I lift my hand above the sheet and rub my head.

There's the sound of footsteps gets my attention. I look to my right and find Astrid carrying a shield with a glass of water and a bowl of oatmeal and an apple sliced into wedges. When she sees me awake, she smiles broadly.

"Morning Soldier." She says with a smile.

"Hey. Morning." I greet.

She sets the shield on my nightstand and first hands me the glass of water. It feels good against my dry throat. The apples taste fresh from the tree, and as I'm eating the oatmeal, she gives me a steady

stream of information.

After both she and Skullette brought me home, Skullette went to Goathy to treat me after she had helped the Whispering Death. Who now has a spot in the Dragon Academy until we can find a use for him. Goathy had said that the impact of my hitting the tree ruptured my spleen. They couldn't save it.

I feel panicked until Astrid says, "Don't worry you don't need one. And if you did, I'm sure they'd find you one." She says. I crack a smile.

Dad had successfully captured Tower 9 with little to no deaths. She tells me that rumors of my death have been running rampant among the Outcasts. And with that, most of the Outcasts have begun to rebel against Alvin, his numbers dwindling with each day that passes. We're to expect ships of Outcasts soldiers to be arriving soon.

As I'm the Dragon Conqueror, I'm obligated to greet them at the docks. They won't be arriving for weeks, so that should give me plenty of time to heal. The Vikings have been thinking about adding the Whispering Death dragon to the group of dragons included in the war. I can see where he'll be useful, but the idea is still up for debate.

Once I finish the oatmeal, the front door and I hear footsteps bound the stairs and Skullette rushes in and hug me when she sees I'm awake. "Good morning to you too." I say in humor.

"Oh my gods, I'm so glad your okay." She says.

"I'm fine." I say.

"Well not really since you're in bed, and you have bad bruises." Astrid interjects.

Skullette gets up and goes and sits on the other side of my bed as Astrid takes the dishes downstairs. "Why does she hate me?" Skullette asks when Astrid's out of hearing range.

I'm taken by surprise at first, but I simply tell her that things are complicated. From there I'm sure she can figure it out. But I have to say, they're getting along well compared to what I thought they would act towards each other. In fact, I think both of them carrying me back to my house was the only teamwork they did together.

Astrid returns, and the three of us talk for a couple hours. To my surprise, the girls didn't fight, interrupt each other, yell at each other, or start a fight. Even if it's all just an act, I appreciate it. They know I can't deal with their personal issues when I'm the face of the rebellion. I have other things to worry about that are, yes, more important than them.

And am I dreaming? Or are they actually laughing together? Who cares, they're getting along, and that's all I ask for. Skullette even tells me about a wedding that's going to take place in the village soon. I'm genuinely excited. It's rare that something joyful ever happens in Berk. Yes, believe it or not, marriages don't usually happen here on Berk.

The couple has personally invited me. They said they would be honored if The Dragon Conqueror would show up and support them. But Astrid 'translates' it saying all I have to do is show up and be happy for them.

"That's one of the few things I won't have to pretend, Astrid." I say.

Around mid-afternoon, I'm given a visit by Goathy to check how I'm progressing. I thought that losing a major organ would entitle me to at least a few weeks in bed, but it turns out that Goathy wants me up and moving immediately.

As part of my rehabilitation, I am to take short walks around the village each day. That's no problem for me since I'm so sick of being in bed. And I'm so bored. This process will be counted as a breather for me. I'm recommended to start today if I want to get a head start. And she doesn't have to write that twice.

I'm out the door in minutes and Skullette and Astrid join me. We walk all around the village, keeping conversations and smiling and laughing. Now this is how I pictured spending time with them. Just being normal and having fun.

The next few days bring a flurry of activity as the wedding is planned. With dad away, Gobber wants it to be simple. Meaning two people sign a piece of paper and be given a new home in the village. But I personally insist they get a big blow out. Plus it was near the end of autumn. Autumn was a popular season after the harvest when plenty of food was available.

Weddings were held on Fridays, sacred to the goddess Frigga. Celebrations often lasted all week. Honey for mead which the couple drank together was collected during the summer months. Enough mead was gathered for a month-long period known as the 'honey-moon.' Following an exchange of swords, the couple exchanged rings. The groom entrusted a sword to the bride for the birth of their first son and/or daughter.

It's amusing to watch the planners haggle over details. People all over the village offer their services, whether it was cooking the food, providing entertainment, and even offered clothing for the bride and groom. But clothing wise, Bertha and the seamstresses have that covered. And there's defiantly no shortage of volunteers for decorations.

Rather than have it hosted in the Great Hall like we did for Snoggletog, it'll be held at the Dragon Academy. We'll lift the chain covering like we did for the Thawfest Games. That way, we can have the entertainment and an open floor for those who want to dance. There's nonstop talk all around the village; people chatting excitedly about the event. Maybe it's more than the festivities. Maybe it's because now that we're in war, we're so starved for something happy and exciting that we all want to be a part of it.

The strange thing is that I catch a few fishermen with Mulch catching a few clams. It seemed unusual since we've never had a use for clams. But when I manage to get a look at the bride's wedding gown while she was visiting the seamstresses for a fitting, it all makes sense. I

linger in the doorway as one of the seamstresses fiddles with the skirt.

The bride, whose name is Jennifer, is a beautiful woman with sea green eyes and curly hair. The day of the wedding, the bride is allowed to wear her hair loose, so it reaches to her mid-back. She has a very slim figure compared to the other Viking women of the Village. A perfect hourglass figure. But believe it or not, the seamstresses seem to be having trouble fitting it for her since she's a bit petite.

The dress is a beautiful thing made with heavy silk with a low neckline and tight waist and sleeves that that fall from her wrists to the floor. And pearls. Everywhere pearls. Stitched into the dress and in ropes at her throat and forming the crown for the veil. No wonder we have so many empty clams in the trash, but when seeing the bride, it was completely worth it.

Bertha sees me in the doorway and invites me in. "Well, you're certainly the most beautiful bride I've seen." And the bride and seamstresses giggle and 'aw'.

Despite reservations from the planners and Gobber, the celebration is a smash hit. The outlining of the arena is lined with autumn foliage and a trio of colored corn for every odd count. The music is provided by a local band known around the village and a lone fiddler. By the end of the day, the entire arena looks unrecognizable.

A local artist had painted the entire floor to mimic the flowers that the Typhoomerang dragon burned in the forest. Only now the colors are more suitable for autumn. Red, orange, yellow and hints of brown. The picture extends until it's touching every single wall of the arena. Lanterns like we had for Snoggletog in the Great Hall, hand from the chain cover and give off a warm welcoming glow. Chairs have been placed for the bridesmaids and groomsmen. They've been placed so it's eight by nine seats.

But apart from the bride and groom, the food is the star of the ceremony. Tables from the Great Hall laden with delicious delicacies laden the outer border of the Academy. Everything we can think of and new recipes we've never seen. Whole roasted boars and pigs still turning on spits. Platters of fowl stuffed with savory fruits and nuts. Ocean creatures drizzled with sauces and begging to be dipped in spicy concoctions. Countless cheeses, bread, fruits and sweets. I've never seen such a gathering of food in my life.

I arrive with Toothless " who looks, cute, with a nice red ribbon tied to his neck " and we greet each and every Viking as we ready for the reveal of the bride. I'm wearing a suit made by Bertha that mimics my Dragon Conqueror uniform, but still suitable for the occasion. A long white tunic with a little poof in the sleeves at the end and that reaches to my waist, a brown belt, and navy blue pants with my typical boot.

I make my way over to the tables of food, each one providing a new temptation. The first table has twenty or so soups, and I encounter a creamy pumpkin brew sprinkled with slivered nuts and tiny black seeds. I try a green broth that I can only describe as tasting like summertime, and then I try a pink soup dotted with raspberries. I move to Skullette's bird made with her family's recipe and pick up a

small part of the roasted bird, bite into it, and my tongue floods with orange sauce. Delicious.

Skullette soon arrives in a beautiful thin-strapped shift dress that fades from a light to a dark blue at the end. Her curly hair is half-up half-down, with a blue flower just at the base of the crown of her head.

We find each other and greet with a kiss. We walk among the crowd hand-in-hand, and I manage to find Fishlegs and the others. The twins are wearing the clothing of the same drown color. The only difference is the style. Ruffnut, a dress. Tuffnut, a suit. Fishlegs wears a white shirt that looks like it could be a hand-me-down from his father and Snotlout wears an exact replica of his normal clothes only the colors are black and white.

As Skullette leaves with Bertha to help with a last minute alter with the bride's dress, I find Gobber and converse with him and a small group of Vikings. When I look to my left, I'm floored at what I see. Astrid. She's absolutely breathtaking.

Her hair is down and straightened, so it's at her mid-back. But still wears her leather headband and her bangs still in her face. Her dress is strapless and is in magnificent shades of rainbow colors to mimic Stormfly. She also has a simple necklace with three baby dragon teeth. The dress hangs in such a way that she doesn't have to lift it when she walks.

I walk over to her when she notices me and I just stare. She giggles and brushes her bangs out of her face. "We should have these special occasions more often." I say. And her cheeks turn pink.

I take her hand lead her to the floor of the arena where the band is playing a traditional Viking song that gets people into the spirit of the party. There's a good enough crowd that we feel comfortable bobbing and bouncing and skipping to the beat. I twirl her and her dress flails out in a beautiful ripple that exaggerates the colors. She's laughing and even giggling, which I think she's done never in her lifetime.

With another spin, she's in my arms. My hands on her waist, hers on my chest. Lost in the moment, I lean in so our foreheads touch. She has the sweet scent of parsnip. We both smile and she looks up at me. Her blue eyes contrast against the orange and yellow. I'm about to say something when all of a sudden Gobber calls me over so he can start the ceremony.

I stutter trying to say something to Astrid, but instead I just look to her and say, "I'll be right back." Then follow Gobber through the entrance of the Academy as the floor clears and the groom, named Logan, readies himself at the altar.

An enormous tapestry with the symbol of Berk printed on it, drapes down from the chain top. A thin rug rolls out from the entrance of the academy, and up to the altar - which is a wide, thick stone placed down with a podium, and Goathy to give the couple a ceremonial prayer.

Gobber who's conducting the ceremony. The band plays the classic wedding ceremony tune, giving the fiddler the lead. Everyone gathers

around as the gate slowly rises to reveal the bride. The families of the couple gather in the seats. Once the gates are open, the reaction is immediate. Everyone 'oh's and 'aw's' at the sight of the bride, and I look over to Logan who looks on the verge of crying from her beauty.

Gobber open the ceremony with an open prayer, then goes on welcoming and congratulating the couple. And highlighting the importance of family and friends attending the ceremony, then reads a passage from 'Thor's Book'. Then the couple exchanges their vows, and after the exchanging of swords, they exchange rings.

Before the bride kisses the groom, it is tradition that the bride brushes kisses with the chief as a sort of blessing and to ensure a long and healthy life and relationship. But since my Dad is away at war, I take his place since I'm the heir. We take each other's hands and brush kisses on both cheeks. Then a kiss with the bride and groom seals the union.

There are cheers and a toast with apples cider and petals of roses are flung in the direction of the bride and groom. The band and fiddler strike up a tune that turns all heads. Sure enough, Fishlegs takes Skullette by the hand and pulls her to the center of the floor and faces off with him. I don't mind, Fishlegs is harmless. People pour in to join them, forming two lines and the dancing begins.

I'm standing off to the side, clapping to the rhythm, when soft fingers pinch me above the elbow. "Are you really going to miss the chance to dance at a wedding?" Astrid asks. And I just smile.

While she is right, while nothing spells victory more than a happy Dragon Conqueror twirling around to music, without my father here to watch, what I know he would describe as a glorious ceremony, it just doesn't feel right.

Dancing transforms Vikings in a way that seems unworldly. Some twirls and spin, others hop up and down, rock back and forth. It varies all around. Everyone joins hands and make a giant spinning circle while the bride and groom dance in the middle. Then others jump in to show off their footwork. It feels like nothing silly, joyful, or fun has happened in so long. Yet another reason why I don't feel like celebrating without my father.

Then Gobber and four other Vikings role out a gigantic cake from the entrance of the Academy. Everyone backs up, making way for this beautiful and dazzling red creation with flame designs on the bottom layer of the cake, slowly snaking up to the top where there are touches of blue for the tip of the flame. It's topped off with a replica of a Terrible Terror. From what I know, the couple owns one. After the cake it sliced and past around, the dance floor opens again.

Then Eleanor, who's the village's best singer "early twenties, light brown hair and brown eyes" steps up on the altar and sings a traditional Viking song that many people say, was written by the gods for their weddings. In our language, it translates to "Friendship to Last." \*\*{0:00}\*\*

It's an after song for the bride and groom. They dance in the middle of the arena while other couples dance around them.

The band strings up a beautiful string a cappella and many other Vikings on the outside of the area simultaneously sing along. Now this song is too good to miss. I go looking for a partner, and surprise myself when I take Astrid's hand. I look around and Skullette's nowhere to be found.

I lead her to the floor and instead of twirling her like before, we simply stand there, her hands enclosed around my neck, mine on her waist. And we just rock back and forth to the music. We let the music control us. She rests her head on my chest, and I rest my chin on her head. When it gets to a certain part, then I twirl her and we even begin to make our way around the floor.

The other couples have made room for us, so we're on an open plain. We get so lost, I even pick her up and we spin together. Her dress flailing out, exaggerating her moves. I set her down and twirl her once more. Then when she finishes, my arm rests over her stomach, my hand cradling her waist, and my cheek just braising her temple.

She momentarily freezes, then looks up to me, and just stares. She turns slightly as the music fades. Our gaze never breaks, but she turns a slight shade of pink. My eyes slide over her skin to her lips. The softness of her mouth. She takes my hand with a feminine touch, closing her soft fingers over mine. Warmth pools in my stomach and spreads lazily through me as I unknowingly tug her hand and pull her closer.

It's like we don't even notice the other Vikings around. The entire world has recessed. My feelings begin to boil over, and I feel such an intense urgency. I raise a hand and tentatively press my two fingers on her lips; braising the skin. Her breath catches, a tiny sound that makes me realize how string she must feel too.

I lower my eyelids and dip my face toward hers.

"Hiccup," she says. No wait, it wasn't her.

The sound of my name slaps some sense into me. My eyes fly open and I jerk back a step. Astrid looks confused, which only adds to my fear.

I look to my left and find Skullette.

## 16. Chapter 16

It's like I've been hit with a thousand flaming boulders combined with Toothless's plasma blasts. My knees feel weak as I stare at Skullette. Her beautiful green eyes, wide and they glisten. I'm frozen, unable to say anything when I desperately need to. I take the risk and step forward.

"Skullette . . ." I start, extending my hand.

But the moment I step forward, she steps back. She takes another step back and just shakes her head. Then she turns and bolts out of the Academy.

"No! Skullette! Wait!" I say as I fail to chase after her.

"Hiccup," I hear behind me. I turn and find Astrid still standing there. She steps closer. I wait there for a moment before I say, "I'm sorry."

Then I turn and leap on Toothless and chase after Skullette. We fly over the village, but I get the feeling she'd want to go somewhere, open. I turn Toothless toward the woods and after two minutes of flying over the trees, we both in unison spot a shadow moving. We dive down and hover over the tree line. I can see her dress flap in the wind.

She notices the shadow, but it's one second too late, and Toothless grabs her by her arms.

She screams a little before she yells, "Hiccup! Let me go!"

I'm about to say no when I remembered she's afraid of heights. I'd expect her to be over her fear by now, but with the emotional state she's in now, her fear could be back, even heightened. I drive Toothless to the Cove since it's the one spot I can think of where we always enjoy ourselves. I'm hoping the pleasant memories will ease her hurt and possible hatred for me.

We land, but Toothless doesn't let her go knowing she'll try and run the moment we let her go. When I hop off, he let's go, but before she can make a break for it, I grab her bicep. "Skullette, wait!"

"No! No let me go! I don't want to see you right now!" she screams, but her voice breaks.

"Skullette you have to give me chance to explain." I say, my voice calm.

"I said no! I don't want to hear anything you have to say!" she harshly yanks her arm free, but doesn't try and run.

Either she knows Toothless will catch her before she can get a few yards from the Cove, or she really does want to know what I have to say. She faces me, but backs away a couple feet, and wipes away a couple of tears.

"Look, I'm sorry about what almost happened back there. This sort of ties into that complicated situation I told you about before." I say.

"You mean that you liked a girl before me?" she says.

"Yep." I say, not denying anything. There's a moment of silence, so I continue on. "Look Skullette, I know nothing I say will change the fact that you're angry with me, and I'll admit you have every right to be," She turns to the water shaking her head. Tears leaking from her eyes, a frown on her lips. "But you should know that the pain of knowing that I hurt you, it, it kills me in ways that I didn't think were imaginable." I surprise both of us when my voice cracks at the end. I feel tears sting my eyes, and I try to blink them away as best as I can.

Skullette's quiet for a minute, then speaks. "I'm not going to lie, I did kind of seeing it coming." She admits with a sniff.



I jerk my head up, "What?"

"Just the way she looks at you, and how she talks to you. It was kind of obvious." She says.

"How do you girls notice these things?" I ask, and I manage to get a smile from her.

"We have special senses." She adds.

"Look Skullette, you know I care about you more than anything in the world, and I would never want to hurt you. And I don't even know why I even did that. I guess with the excitement of the celebration and the way you both looked all pretty and dressed up. And I'm not saying that that's an excuse but I guess, I just got lost in the moment. And I don't think I'm really helping myself out here."

"Hiccup, you're sweet, you're kind, and I know you would never try and hurt me. And I guess I should be glad that it didn't happen." She says. I would add that nothing happened only because she stopped me, but I've dug a deep enough hole already, I definitely don't want to dig any deeper.

"I can't even tell you how sorry I am. And I don't even think it'll be good enough to help you. I really don't even deserve you right now." I admit.

Now I'm scared that she'll break up with me. And she has every right to. And there's no way that the pain from that can even begin to compare to the pain I feel knowing that I've hurt her, even broke her heart.

She rubs her arm for a minute before she speaks, still staring at the water. "I am, extremely hurt by what I saw. But not as much as I thought I would be." She says. I perk my head up. "Maybe it's because it didn't happen, or I saw it coming, I don't know."

"But I still hurt you, Skullette. And I want to know, from you personally, what I can do to make it better; make it up to you. If I can. Or even if I should."

She rubs her arm again and shrugs her shoulders, "I-I don't know, Hiccup. I've never been, almost-cheated on before."

"I can imagine why. Only a complete idiot would even think about cheating on you. And here I am. Jackass and all." She turns to me, shocked I even used that word.

Just from one look at me you can tell I'm not a person who swears a lot. So by me using that word, she must know how mad I am at myself for what I, almost did.

"So, what happened with you two?" she asks.

"Uh, well, we were never a couple. It was just a mutual attraction. And honestly she didn't even like me until after I had trained dragons and defeated the Green Death."

"The queen of dragons?" she asks.

"Yeah. But we never became a couple even after that. We just left it as is. She would give a kiss every now and then, but only in the sense that it was a reward. And I even had a talk/fight with her about not interfering with our relationship, and yet here we are." I explain.

Skullette turn to me and just looks at me. As if waiting for me to continue, but I stay quiet. And I work up the courage to ask, "So what do we do now?"

She looks down at first, and then she brushes some curls out of her face. She takes a deep breath and sighs. She crosses her arms and swallows hard. I prepare for the worst. "I'm not going to break up with you." She says.

I look at her, and suddenly I feel like leaping all over the place. Screaming, smiling, and laughing. But instead, something possessed me and I look to her and ask, "Why?"

"Well, for one thing, nothing really happened. And secondly, you're a really great guy, Hiccup. And I know you'd never do this, and you're just not that kind of guy." She says taking my hands. "You're better than that."

Tears sting my eyes. I'm so overjoyed that she's even giving me a second chance. I begin to mutter words of promise and love and she talks over me telling me it's okay and to stop.

"But there's one thing we need to do," she says. I look to her. "You need to tell me everything that happened with you guys."

I give her a surprised look, but we sit down, and I start from the beginning. "Well, it all started when I laid eyes on her. She was with the others in training to be a Viking and I was working in the Blacksmith shop at the time. This was back when I was a nobody . . ."

For the rest of the night, I told her the story about everything we've been through. From starting out about when I first met Toothless, to how we flew together, and how she even kissed me after I was in bed for a few weeks. Moving onto the Dragon Academy, and a kiss that happened after the Thawfest games.

By the end of the night, I know I've only gained a small portion of her trust back. We fly back and when we drop her off home, I simply say goodbye with a kiss on her cheek. I'm walking on eggshells until she shows me or tells me that she's fully forgiven me.

The next morning, I wake up at the crack of dawn and fly around with Toothless for a few hours. Things feel rather normal as we fly by but as we're passing by the ocean on our way to the docks, I can just make out several ships. With an Outcast symbol on it.

I'm about to open fire, but I remind myself that we're expecting a small fleet of ships to arrive. So instead, I fly back home and ask Gobber when he's expecting the ships. He says it's today. He was about to tell me, but I flew out with Toothless before he could tell me. I rush to the seamstresses' shop to retrieve my Dragon Conqueror suit, dress in a minute and head down to the docks.

I run up as the first ship docks. There must be at least half of Alvin's men on the ships when added together. And there are at least four ships. Gobber and two other Vikings help the men off the boat, and when they walk up and see me, they practically bow to me, kissing my boot. But the most I hear is how they're surprised and even overjoyed to see me alive. Otherwise, their mutiny against Alvin was all for none.

I greet each one with a handshake and smile. They act like I'm about to attack them, but the truth is my bow is back at the blacksmith's shop and my secret weapons are at the seamstress' shop since they had to make some alterations. They each greet me with a look that would make people think I'm their savior. It's possible in a way I am, since I've welcomed them into my village with open arms, despite the fact that I could've just executed them all.

As the last ship empties its cargo, I manage to talk to one of the Outcasts and ask about the progress of the war. He tells me that Towers 7, 6, 5, and even 4 have all turned against Alvin and now work under Viking rule. Alvin's numbers continue to dwindle, but Savage still worships the ground he walks on. With the help of the Outcasts, we've gained more information in a matter of days that would've taken months to figure out.

Gobber pulls me aside as the Outcasts find their new homes. He tells me that my Dad wants me to fly to the island with the others so that we can invade the last remaining towers. There are still rebel Outcasts living on Outcasts Island, but they're working undercover so that they can help with the takeover, and learn more about Alvin's new war plan now that it's taken a serious change.

Sitting around the house has made me feel extremely lazy, and healing my wounds has left me missing weeks of training. But even with that, I'm excited.

After sitting and lying around just watching the war role by me, I'm puckish for a little action.

The trip isn't for another couple of days, so I use the time to brush up on my training with Gobber and hunt around the woods with Skullette to sharpen my shooting skills. One day, I roam into the woods alone one afternoon with Toothless. We simply go to the Cove where he helps me take on a stuffed dummy Gobber had made for me to practice sword training. Only this time, I'm spicing things up by using two swords. I've only been trained to use the one, but I want to challenge myself.

The dummy is named Bob and he's about Gobber's height and weighs at an even one hundred and seventy pounds. He's got me by forty or more pounds and fifteen inches. Dad told me that if I could take out the dummy, I could handle any man who tried to give me trouble. I lunge and stab and block while Toothless yanks at a rope that's draped over the root of the tree he usually hangs from when he's sleeping.

While he seems to be enjoying it, I decided to string a heavy wire between two trees and hooked Bob to it. The dummy slides, swings, and moves with my own momentum, and while it isn't the same as fighting an intelligent person, he keeps me on my toes. I can run through him with my one sword, yank the blade free, duck, and spin around to bury

my weapon in his back while he slides toward me.

But two swords are another story. I slam the pommel of one into Bob, but can't spin the blade of the other around before my sparring partner swings back and sends me sprawling. After my fourth disastrous attempt, I let fly with most creative swear word I ever heard the Viking men say. I toss both swords aside as they hit the ground with a loud metallic clatter. I can't master it. Can't swing around in time to deliver the crucial blow that could mean the difference between life and death.

I lay back in the grass, squint against the glare of the afternoon sun, and suddenly feel like crying. With dad at my side, I always felt invincible. Now I feel like a freshly shorn lamb, stripped bare of a shield I never thought I'd lose. But I remember him telling me about the war, and how it could offer me a new challenge. This is one.

I push myself up to a sitting position and rest my elbows on my knees. My hands locked together. Toothless comes over and licks my cheek. "I can't give up. But how am I going to fight without my Dad?" I ask him as I pet his forehead. He purrs in reply.

"I can teach you." Gobber says quietly, and my head snaps up.

He's a few yards away, his face shadowed by the branches of the tree he stands under. As he steps forward, the sunlight brushes against his face, and his eyes are steady with the same determination I always see in my Dad's.

"I know I can't replace him, not that I'd want to, but I know how to fight." He says.

I think back to his attempt at helping me train for the Thawfest games. While I was pathetic at helping, he was there and he supported me.

I smile and push myself to my feet. Grasp both swords. Close my eyes. Take a deep breath that smells of grass, sun-warmed dirt, and the freshwater that the Cove offers. I feel Gobber standing in front of me, his hands covering mine and holding me in place.

I widen my stance, crouch, and remember the last time we sparred together.

"Drop your shoulders a bit. You'll need the room to move." He tightens his grip on my hands when they start to slide together. "No, you don't. Nice wide grip. Keep it loose. Gives you balance and control. That's a boy."

I drop my shoulders, widen my grip and open my eyes.

"All right, now, you've got a weapon in both hands. You'll only have seconds to decide which one to use first." He let's go of my hands, and places callused palms on my shoulders. "Big man, springing towards you."

"Weapon?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter, Hiccup. He's twice your size and his speed will

bring him in range within seconds. Which end do you use?" His fingers curl on my shoulders as if willing me to know the answer.

"Blade. No time to swing the pommel." I slide the blade free and crouch, the afternoon sun painting my skin with shades of pink as I sweat.

"Very good." He squeezes my shoulders and paces back and forth. "Now if you must engage in an opponent who is bigger, stronger, and faster, what do you do?"

"Take him down. Make it so he can't get up and come after me." I answer.

"Yes. He won't expect a hiccup to know how to stop him. You get one chance to surprise him. Make full use of that advantage." I nod. "Where do you make the first cut?" His eyes are a deep gray, like the sky before the rain falls.

"Let him come in, then spin and slash the inner thigh as I turn. Cut open the artery." I say.

He steps out of my way and I draw in a deep breath, imagine Bob as an enemy Outcast barreling toward me, let him come almost too close for comfort, and then spin and slash, planting my left foot to keep my balance for the next move.

"Good! He's bleeding, but the pain hasn't hit yet, and he doesn't realize how badly he's hurt. He'll try to come after you. How do you stop him?"

"Cut the Achilles tendon as he passes me, then get out of range." I spin and slash again, the blades beginning to feel like an extension of my arms as I thrust, turn, and slice in tune with Gobber's voice.

He's clapping, pride and love written on his face. "You did it. I knew you could."

Then he brings forward a burlap sack and pulls out two wooden swords. "What's this?" I ask.

"Now that you can handle two swords, we'll work on close combat." He says. "Shield your blade. We'll count a single solid touch from the blade as a strike."

I toss aside the two swords and take the wooden one, feeling like a young kid. I widen my stance, and roll on the balls of my feet. Gobber walks toward me, his sword whistles through the air, and I leap back to dodge the blow. Spinning he taps me with the wooden blade before I can raise my arm in defense.

"My point." He says, and he doesn't bother hiding his smirk.

I circle him, "Lucky shot."

He lashes out again, but I'm ready this time. Blocking him with the middle of my sword, I whirl beneath Gobber's outstretched arm and slam the hilt into his thigh.

Pride keeps him from swearing at the pain. Instead, he sweeps my feet out from under me. I flip in midair and roll forward and land, coming up with my stick ready.

"The controlled grace of your movements would make your Dad proud." He says, and I smile. "You're fast. That's good." He says, advancing toward me.

"You're not bad for an old warrior." I say.

We block, parry, and break apart.

"You're strong Hiccup, but I'm worried that you don't know how to anticipate the unexpected." He says and he steps back, inviting an attack.

I charge forward, swinging the wooden blade like a butcher slicing the head from a wild boar. Gobber waits until the last second, then drops to the ground and rams me with his shoulder. My forward momentum carries me over the top of him and I land face-first into the grass.

I spit dry blades of grass from my mouth. I stare at him, a new respect for him in my eyes. A smile flits across my lips.

"I was a warrior before you were even born, Hiccup. Literally." He offers a hand up. "You need to be ready for an opponent who does the unexpected." He tells me as he pulls me to my feet. "Got it?"

"Got it." I assure.

With a hard pat, we walk back to the village. It's around early evening, so I decide to go see Mulch and Bucket. I've been getting to know them better and have been trying to spend as much time with them as I can. Bucket loves to push me around in a wheelbarrow ride. He says it's fun, and I'm lighter than their normal loads so he can push me around, probably all day if he wanted to.

Talking with Bucket is fun since he's always honest even though he's less intelligent than normal Vikings. But he's honest, and something about him just seems genuine. Like you can tell him anything and he won't judge you. The day ends on a good note as I catch a glimpse of Jennifer and Logan moving some whicker baskets into their new home in the Town's Square.

I go to bed that night in a good mood and have a pleasant, dreamless sleep. The next morning, I dress in my uniform, gather my weapons, and prep Toothless's saddle. Then I fly down to the docks where Astrid and the others wait with Gobber who's prepping the ships for departure. Snotlout and the twins talk while Fishlegs caudles with Meatlug. Astrid pets Stormfly as Gobber loads up cargo on the ship. I decide to take a risk and talk to her.

A couple nights ago, I just left her there in the middle of the dance floor all alone. True I had apologized, but I still feel guilty about leaving her. Skullette will be arriving soon so I'll have to keep it brief. But when I talk to Astrid, she acts like I never even left her.

"Astrid, you don't have to pretend, I know that I hurt you by leaving

you. And you didn't deserve that. And I have no right to keep leading you on like this. Especially when I know this could go someplace." I say.

"Hiccup, you don't have to apologize. I was the one being stupid. I know you told me about not messing with your relationship, and I know that I have been. And I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Astrid. Look, I promise you'll find someone who'll love you, better than I ever could." I say taking her hands.

"I'm not giving up on you, Hiccup." She suddenly says, and I'm confused. She looks to me and her eyes glisten. "I know I'm wanting what I can't have, but someone like you only happens maybe once in a lifetime." I stay quiet. "Call me crazy, but I know this could go somewhere too. If I have to, I'm not afraid to save my heart for you, Hiccup."

"Astrid . . ." I start. But she shushes me.

"You can tell me I'm wrong, and turn around and go. But still I'm going to save my heart for you, Hiccup." Then with a kiss on my cheek, she mounts Stormfly and ascends into the air.

"Hey Hiccup!" I hear Skullette call not long after. She kisses my same cheek hello and asks if the boats are ready.

I nod and after she hops on the boat, I mount Toothless and with one flap we ascend into the sky. The whole ride seemed too short, as I was lost in thought about what Astrid said.

The only thing that snaps me back is the sound of a flaming boulder hurdling toward me.

## 17. Chapter 17

Toothless whirls out of the way in time. The boulder just braising his stomach, but he can take it since his skin's fireproof. But the sudden whip has thrown us off course and we're spinning and twirling trying desperately to regain out balance.

Even with the world spinning, I can see the Outcasts ship, with three men armed with crossbows. I can't eliminate the idea that they could be undercover rebels just firing at us to allure suspicion. But when I see Gobber and the other men open fire, I dive down with Toothless and shoot at the closest man. He falls as my arrow penetrates his chest. I can tell from the wound, I just missed his heart and lung. But the damage will still do well.

Toothless circle the boat as we see Gobber and Mulch hop on the enemy boat. I see an Outcast just off to the left as he readies a crossbow. He fires and Toothless and I both dodge. In an instant, the second after I dodge he ends up with two arrows in his chest. I fired two to make sure I wouldn't miss.

Once I see Gobber and the men evacuate the ship, I open fire with three fire arrows. A fire blossoming on the ship in seconds. As we close in on the shore, I can see at least four catapults with three marauders working each. The dragons open fire on half of the

catapults, destroying them in an instant. Then once Ruff and Tuff's Zippleback sprays a cover fire of gas, I aim an explosive arrow and the entire cliff side obliterates, black smoke drifting into the sky.

Using the wind currents, we guide the smoke to cover the rest of the regiment. Toothless dives down and I leap off and ready an arrow. He lands not too far from me and we both stalk through the smoke. I see an apparition form in the mist and I'm about to fire, but I have a brief flashback to when we were training at the arena and Snotlout and Tuffnut mistook Ruffnut and Astrid for the dragon. The figure comes closer and I see it's Bucket.

I see him peer over my shoulder and I whirl around and an Outcast who was about to go for a fatal blow gets an arrow in the calf. As he doubles over, I whack him with my bow and a gash opens on his forehead. With another whack, he's on the ground out cold. There's the sound of grunting men and punches being thrown.

"Duck!" I hear Bucket command in such a powerful voice, so different to his usual bubble-brain voice, that I do. He chucks his axe and it goes whizzing over my head and there's sickening sound as it finds its target.

I look to my right and feel the ground vibrate and the Whispering Death bursts right in front of me. Roaring and scaring the off the Outcasts with just a simple roar. The smoke starts to clear and soon everyone can see one another. Toothless whips away an oncoming Outcast like a fly and Skullette shoots an arrow at another who's wielding a bludgeon. It sinks into his calf and with another whack of her bow, he falls over the cliff side and plummets to the rocky shore.

Mulch has caught up with Bucket, so I leave the two and go help Gobber who's baited with one against four. One Outcast immediately loses his eye to my arrow. I shoot another that was heading for me once he noticed my presence. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. Gobber takes out the other two by first knocking the first one unconscious, then spinning around and slicing the other in the jugular.

By now the smoke's cleared and I look around for Astrid and the others. I see Fishlegs and Snotlout cornered by three more Outcasts. I run over and shoulder roll in front of them. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side. Another one of my arrows finds a home in an Outcast's heart.

One leaps but I whack him away from them with the bow. It slams into his stomach and he grunts as he the wind gets knocked out of him. As he's holding his stomach, I hold his head and slam my knee in to the back of his neck. There's a snap and he falls to the ground. Motionless.

Then another one tackles me, but thankfully his weapon never reaches my flesh. We somersault back until he's beneath me and I pull out my knife and mercilessly slash its throat. I retract the knife, grab my bow again and aim another arrow and it gets buried up to the shaft in the Outcast's stomach.

I whirl around to face Fishlegs and Snotlout. "You guys okay?" I ask.



Completely unfazed by what I just did. But they stare at me and my work. Their eyes wide and mouths wide open. And there's even the glint of fear. But they nod to me and I run off toward Toothless as he's making his way toward me.

"Hiccup!" I hear Gobber call. I look around and find him running toward me. "That's sit. We need to get to the camp." He tells me.

I look around and at least all of the men lie there dead. Others have run off and or stay on the ground, waiting for death. We all regroup and I find we've only lost man. I didn't know his name, but I manage to find him among the dead Outcast bodies. He had received an arrow in the back.

I sling my bow over my shoulder and take one last look at the cliff side now littered with the dead bodies of the Outcasts. Then I do the unexpected. I walk around and pull my arrows out harshly from the bodies and then place them back into the sheath. Planning to clean them later. Then I walk back over toward Toothless and while Gobber looks normal, Astrid and the others I know are staring at me with disgust and shock.

After we mount our dragons, Gobber and the other men walk toward the campsite where Dad and the other soldiers are posted. We flow no more than a thousand feet in the air so we still have visual on Gobber and the others while still having an aerial advantage over the Outcasts.

I'm a stone-cold aerial killer. Death from above.

"Hey Hiccup," I hear to my left. I look and find Astrid flying next to me.

Suddenly I'm aware of how quiet it is. I turn and find everyone with a concerned and worried look on their faces. I'm confused as to why.

"Yeah?" I reply.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah, why?" I say.

"Uh, well, you . . ." she struggles to find an answer. And if there's one thing I know, Astrid's never at a loss for words.

Then Fishlegs interjects boldly, but still hesitant. "You were like a killing machine out there. And that's not like you at all and it was really scary." He says quickly. As if he wants to get it out before I shot him off of Meatlug.

I turn to Snotlout and the twins and Snotlout almost avoids my gaze if it weren't for a flick of his eyes in my direction. The twins just stay silent. I don't know how to react or reply since I was honestly in a daze as I was fighting. Only focused on protecting those I care about. And to destroy those who put them in harm's way.

I was honestly, oblivious to what I was doing; only knowing I have a drive to eliminate those who try to attack me. It was as if it was a second nature. And now I see, it's completely out of my personality.

Completely out of my realm. That's what makes it so scary. It's so not like me.

"I'm sorry." I say. It's the only thing I can think of to say.

I can't apologize for killing the Outcasts, apologize for killing them in order to protect my friends. It's my only option. Those men are out for my flesh. And they would've killed me if I didn't strike first. So apologizing for scaring them is the only thing I can do. While it's harsh to admit, they need to see that for war, it's kill or be killed. Just like Mulch said. Better than the days when it was kill or be killed

You're out on your own in war. Everyone's out to make sure you don't live to see the morning. It should be a second instinct. And they know this. I'm surprised that they're scared for me rather than for the war. But when I dig deeper inside me, I realize they should be. Suddenly I'm very upset, and I know it's connected to them. It takes a moment before I figure it out, and when I do, it's almost too mortifying to admit.

I just killed about six, maybe seven men. And I didn't even flinch, didn't hesitate, didn't even have the slightest tremor in my hands. If I were still me, the old me, I would've tried to compromise with them, then if that failed, I'd try to find some form of bail out. But instead, someone else, some Monster, took control over me and just massacred those men. The war has changed me. In ways that I know aren't good.

Now no one can even picture me as the scrawny, little embarrassment I was before. And now, I find myself wanting them to picture me like that again. But I know they can't. He got blown out of the water the minute I joined the war. Now, I'm someone else, and they see it. It's someone I don't want to be, but have no choice to be.

They see me for what I am. Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly.

I really have become the Dragon Conqueror. And I did it no matter what the personal cost. I had to put aside my feelings in order to do it. The success of the rebellion hinges on my shoulders, my willingness to be a pawn, to accept responsibility for countless lives, and to change the course of the future for Berk. And I did it.

We soon land at the campsite and the first thing I do is greet my Dad with a hug, and tell him about the wedding. He's pleased to hear it went well, and it proud that I handled it well. Skullette greets Chief Boggs with hugs and kisses and she begins to tell all what's happened. I see my squad walk up and I notice someone missing. Gobber, Skullette and Mulch and Bucket were all with me. There's that woman, True who went along with Dad. Hunter and Lucas were with Dad. Maybe that's it. Hunter's alone.

"Where's Lucas?" I ask. And there's that feeling of tension that's so thick you can cut it with a knife.

When we're in my Dad's tent, he tells me that while they were scoping the outer perimeter of the camp, they were ambushed by Outcasts with crossbows. On found Lucas' brain. He was gone before the medics could

reach him. They couldn't even bring his body back since the ambush was too strong. Gobber apparently promised a speedy replacement. My guilt floods me since I was so insensitive. But Dad tells me it's okay since I didn't know.

But that night, as I'm coming back from a bath in the creek, I hear Hunter in his tent. It sounds like he's just finally broken down over his brother's death, and I hear his muffled sobs through the tent. When I get to my own, I feel my own tears reach out and mourn the loss of Lucas.

So in his honor, and Lucas' permission, I take a piece of his clothing — his weapons are too good to lose and I doubt he wants to part with them. It's probably the one thing he has to feel closest to his brother — wrap it in leather and set it on fire. I give it a gentle push it out into the water. It floats toward the middle, then once the wood burns through, the whole thing sinks into the water. I jab a small flag with the symbol of Berk into the dirt. So people know a brave warrior was lost.

Lucas grips my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. I know he appreciates this. We both go to bed that night both feeling a little better. I clean my weapons by the water, wanting to suddenly rid them of the blood. I go back into my tent and try to sleep as best I can. But my dreams are filled with horrid graphics of Lucas. He's calling, pleading to me. But when I try to help him, it's like I'm stuck in place and can't move.

He's soon swallowed by the blackest hole I've ever seen. It's like the one made from the Whispering Death. He screams as he plummets into nothing. I wake with a start and sweating even in the cold weather. I'm breathing heavy and my tent seems deprived of oxygen. It's around midnight when I crawl out of my tent and position myself on a camp stool near the fire.

The rest of the night I slip in and out of a horrid dream state trying to save Lucas even though it's inevitable. In the morning, I know I have bags under my eyes, and my muscles are sore from the cold wind. And yet I feel well rested. My drive to avenge Lucas powers me through early morning training then the two hour fly it takes to get to Tower 3.

We land a couple miles from the border of the wall surrounding the Tower and the small village. I do the same as before and pull the hood of my cape up over my head and conceal my sheath of normal arrows and a knife.

We ride on horseback for the rest of the trip. Not wanting to take any chances, knowing that Alvin's probably kept everyone on high alert of my arrival, the minute the iron gate and two guards come into view, I shoot one down, and while the other looks at his partner in confusion, he's gone before he can even turn his head to find where the arrow came from.

The gates open from one of our secret operatives from the inside. We park the horses and I follow Gobber and the others into an alley that merges with a paved street that leads to the tower. I keep to the side, head down, looking like I'm doing nothing more than hurrying home.

Dark skies cover the sky, and a chilly breeze is blowing, carrying hints of the storm to come. I calculate no more than ten minutes before a fierce round of winter rain hits, reducing visibility to nothing. I pick up the pace. I exit one alley, turn left, and stride along the street, my cloak wrapped close, my expression neutral. I make a right into another alley between what seems to be an armory and an abandoned warehouse.

No one seems to be following us, but the number of guards on duty has defiantly increased. Even with the remaining numbers of soldiers Alvin has. The alley twists away from the street and ends abruptly at the edge of an expanse of waist-high yellow grass about fifty yards wide. Beyond the grass, the wall around the tower looms. There wasn't one for Tower 10, must be due to the fact that it's closer to the town of the Outcasts.

Immense steel ribs joined by tons of concrete as thick as twelve men standing shoulder to shoulder wrap around the tower. Every one hundred yards, a turret rises. Guards assigned to the wall spend most of their shift in their assigned turrets. But from I was told, three times a day " at dawn, at noon, and at night " they leave the turret to do a detailed sweep of their section of the wall.

I reach the edge of the field just as the first drops of rain slam into the ground. The guards in the turret closest to me step into the steady downpour, swords in hand, and walk north with measured positions. Everyone gets into positions, ducking beneath the grass. I rise from the center of the field. I stay low to the ground and race across the field in spurts " sprint, drop, roll into a crouch, and repeat. Beneath the curtain of rain, aided by the swiftly falling darkness, I'm nothing but a shadow.

But if Dad can still see me, then so can the guard above him too. In seconds I hear the whoosh of a body plummeting to the ground and brace myself. He lands slightly to the right of Gobber, but all of his attention on me. Gobber slams his fist into the side of his head, and drag his unconscious body back under the lip of the roof. A quick scan of the area confirms that no other guards are perusing me.

I reach the wall before the faint glow of a guard's lantern has completely disappeared in the distance. I estimate just under ten minutes before the guards return. Just under ten minutes to capture the tower, subdue whatever guards try to fight, and ride off before Alvin arrives. The driving sheets of rain make it hard to be certain, but I'm pretty sure one just ran for Gobber. But I know they can handle themselves. I reach the wall and start up a ladder.

I make it to the top before the others can reach the base. The rain pounds into me, but I barely notice it due to the cloak, and the adrenaline that I've become so dependent on when it comes to fighting in the war. The rungs are slippery, so I wrap my hands in my leather cloak, grasp the metal, and climb as quickly as I can.

I scramble over the lip of the wall and race into the rounded stone turret a few yards to my left. Rain pounds the walkway as I grad the handle of my bow, finally reveal it from my cloak. I don't have long before the guards return. I drag my cloak closer to my body and now the rain is falling in opaque sheets. I'll be lucky if I can see two yards in front of me. Which means the guards won't be able to see me either. But it also means I can't see what waits for me in the

tower.

Ducking into the doorway, my hands shake as I rehearse my plan.

Run out the doorway. Sprint and take out any guards I encounter. Find the winch to iron the gates. Grab the edge of the wall. Vault over. Set the tower on fire and wait for Toothless to retrieve me. One wrong move and I'll never be heard from again.

It has to work. It will work.

I take a deep breath and sprint out the door.

With my sheath ready, I lock an arrow in place. A guard who was returning is dead before he even sees me hurdling toward him. I need to get to the turret that houses the winch to open the gates. Once everyone's in, we can storm the tower.

I duck into another doorway that's just a closet for weapons. I manage to find another bow and an extra sheath of arrows. Rather than carry more weight, and considering the weapons I bought back at Tower 10, I just load the arrows into my sheath, the once I check to see if the cost is clear, I sprint back out again.

I skid to a stop when I see an Outcast guard. His back is turned to me and as I load an arrow he turns. I'm about to fire, when the weapon is dropping to the ground and the unarmed man is holding up something out to me in his gloved hand.

"Stop!" he cries.

I waver, unable to process the turn of events. I can't stay long; Dad and the others will be waiting for the gates to open. And with the downpour, they'll die from hypothermia or ammonia. My fingers have all but decided to release the arrow when I see the object in the glove. It's the symbol of Berk. Sewn into the material. And undercover Outcast.

I lower my bow and retrieve the man's weapon. Once he tells me something I know that will qualify him as an official rebel, he leads me to the turret with the winch and once I activate it, the rattle of the gates opening vibrates through the tower. The rebel Outcast orders me to run, but since he helped me, I refuse to leave him behind. Together, we'll have a better chance at getting out of the tower alive since now it'll be flooded with guards wondering who opened the gate.

We run and while I take out at least four guards in front of me, the Outcast rebel takes out any from the back who materialize from any hidden rooms. We're at the stairwell that leads to the gateway. We sprint out and I can see they're open wide enough for everyone to get in. We're running and I call back to him saying good job as we make our way to the tower. I can see Gobber and Dad punch a few Outcasts while others battle against each other, protecting my Dad and squad.

Astrid grabs the shield of an Outcast and uses that for her protection. Fishlegs and Snotlout fly on their dragons, shooting at the tower. I have the Outcast rebel still close behind and just as I think he's going to make it with us, a flaming catapult boulder comes

out of nowhere and blows off his legs.

I skid to a stop as screams emanate from Astrid, thinking I've been hit. Blood stains the muddy ground and smoke darkens the sky even more. A second catapult seems to split the air and leaves my ears ringing. But I can't make out from where it came from.

I throw my weapon in the mud and reach the Outcast first and try to make sense of the torn flesh, missing limbs, to find something to stem the red flow from his body. Another rebel Outcast pushes me aside, wrenching open a first-aid kit. The Outcast clutches my wrist. His face, gray with dying and ash, seems to be receding. But his next words are an order. "My spear."

His spear. His weapon. I scramble around, digging through chunks of tile slick with blood, shuddering whenever I encounter bits of warm flesh. Find it rammed into the ground head first. Wedge it free and retrieve it, wiping it clean with bare hands as I return it to the Outcast.

The one providing first-aid has the stump of the Outcast's left thigh cupped by some sort of compression bandage, but it's already bled through. He's trying to tourniquet the other above the existing knee. The rest of our squad has gathered in a protective formation around us. Dad's attempting to retrieve True, who was thrown back into a wall by the explosion. The Outcast works desperately to fix the one wounded, but I know it's too late.

Growing up, watching Gobber bring in an occasional wounded warrior when I was younger, I've learned that once a pool of blood has reached a certain size, there's no going back. I kneel beside the bloody Outcast, giving him someone to hold on to as he's released from life. But he has both hands working on his spear. He fumbles with the head of it, and as I'm about to offer to help him since I can't stand looking at the way he childishly messes with it, suddenly it top pops off and he shakes out a small arrow tip.

It's a Brodhead arrow tip. These thing can shoot through anything.

He places it in the palm of my hand and encloses my fingers on it. "Take it. This'll shoot him down." He tells me

There's a loud snap of a trap. I look and four cables, attached to tracks break through the mud, dragging up the net that encases an Outcast. It makes no sense " how instantly bloodies he is " until I see the barbs sticking out form the wire that encases him. I know immediately.

There are orders to drag the Outcast to shelter, but he'll just be in more pain, and I don't want to put him through that. He's already too far gone. I turn back to the Outcast. His lips are moving, but I can't make out what's he's saying. Though the firing seems to have ebbed a little.

I lean my ear down to his mouth to catch his harsh whisper. "Aim for the heart. Don't trust him. Do what you came to do."

"W-What? What?" I ask, but it's too late. His eyes are still open, but dead. Pressed in my hand, glued to it by his blood, is the arrow

tip.

Rage and fury overtake my panic and fuels me. My body reacts before my mind does. I hide the arrow tip in my belt, shoot up and sprint. Retrieve my bow and practically plow through the gang of Outcast soldiers, arrows finding places all over their bodies, barreling into the Tower. The next thing I know, I'm at the top of the tower, my bow slung over my shoulder.

There's the body of an Outcast soldier at my feet. Bloody and mutilated. There are forty-one slashes at his face and throat. My feet stand in a pool of blood. Splatters of blood on my uniform and even on my face. I'm breathing heavy and there's a sense of satisfaction. The blade of my hidden knife on my forearm is doused in blood and my fist is clenched tight.

I pull out some wood that's been kept in wooden boxes and pile them all on top of the Outcast's body. The blood begins to dry from the winter cold and I manage to find a fire arrow in my sheath.

I simply strike it against the sandpaper of my bow and lazily toss it on the wood. I walk to the edge of the balcony posted on the tower and call to Toothless. He flies under me and when we reach the ground, I hop off and just walk forward. Not bothering to hide my face with splattered blood. The blade of the knife still visible, my face neutral.

Everyone stares at me. The feeling of their gazes burns through my skin. Their faces range in 'aw' and horror as they try to piece together what I've just done. I'm still trying to figure it out myself. I pass the body of the Outcast who aided me in the turret. I mourn silently and give him my final goodbye as the tower collapses behind me.

## 18. Chapter 18

The fly back to the campsite was dead silent. Okay wrong choice of words, but no one said a word, and I felt like they were avoiding looking at me. I'm flying ahead while everyone else stays behind; no one even matches my pace. The sun setting over the horizon.

I clutch the arrow tip I received from the unknown Outcast soldier who aided me, in my palm. He gave his life for me. I bring it to me chest.

My head's reeling from the ghastly events of the last hour â€" the unknown Outcast mutilated, dying, dead, my homicidal rage, and another Outcast bloody and netted and swallowed by the foul black smoke. I drift to the Outcast's last words . . .

\_"Take it. This'll shoot him down. Aim for the heart. Don't trust him. Do what you came to do."\_

What did he mean? Don't trust who? The Outcasts? Alvin? I knew that. That was obvious from the beginning not to trust him. But if it was that obvious, I feel like I'm missing something. Did he mean not to trust someone on my own team? Not to trust the Outcast rebels? The people who supposedly want to take down their former leader?

I slightly turn my head to the side, my eyes peering to the back, very badly needing him alive. To explain everything. I can't work all of this out now, so I conceal the arrow tip in my belt. Apart from Dad and Gobber, I'm suddenly sure that he, and he alone, is completely on my side.

Suddenly I'm feeling so alone. Coming up with so many theories about just those simple orders from the Outcast rebel. Don't trust Alvin. Don't trust the Outcasts. Don't trust the rebel Outcasts? Don't trust my own team? My own friends? It's possible right now our entire village could be under siege because we let the Outcasts on our shores, into our village. The only thing that keeps me from steering home is the thought of the Outcasts coming ashore, and kissing my shoes and their acts of salvation.

No Outcast could act like that if they had to. They were genuine. But with so many questions swirling in my head, I decide to carry out the first orders: don't trust anyone.

My face feels crusty and I realize the blood on my face. It's dry so it scrapes off with ease. But when I see the dry blood soiling my forearm and knife, I feel sick to my stomach. A realization just hit me. The rush of everything kept me from seeing, even feeling everything that happened. I flashback to the Outcast in the tower. Face ripped to shreds. Soaked in a pool of blood. My feet standing in the blood. My knife red. My glove red. My uniform and face splattered.

But what scares me the most is the feeling of satisfaction. I was happy I killed him. Happy he paid for killing the Outcast. What I thought was me avenging the death of the soldier. It was really me getting revenge. Getting even. Me killing him for him killing the Outcast. I relive the feel of my smile. So horrid. So evil that it's more like a grimace.

What have I become? I'm becoming no better than the Outcasts. No better than Alvin.

Suddenly I'm shaking, but not wanting them to see me like this, I force myself to keep my composure until we get back to camp, and I can crawl into my tent.

Once back at the camp, we land and as we're walking in, I look to my left, out of peripherals. I see a shadow, creeping up to the sight. I see the symbol on his shoulder plate. I walk over normally, so normal the Outcast doesn't see me. People are about to call to me, until they see the figure. No one stopping me indicates that he's not a rebel.

He turns to me, and the expression on his face says he recognizes me. He opens his mouth to say something.

Without hesitation, I shoot him through the heart.

I leave the arrow and step over him. Completely unfazed. I walk on ahead to the lake.

"Hiccup." My dad calls to me. But I wave him off as I head for the lake. Uniform, weapons and all. Even with the distance I have, I can hear the Viking men drag the dead body away.



Once I reach the lake, the first thing I do is place my weapons propped up against the trunk of a weeping willow. Then I strip off my Dragon Conqueror uniform so I'm only in my undergarments. Then hang it on a branch.

I step out from the curtain of vines, then take a deep breath and dive head first into the water. The water's crisp on top and murky below. Even with the cold-front moving in, the water's warm, like in the summer. Or my feelings have fired the whole things up.

My feet kick up eddies of sand and rock. I float down to the bottom and try to get a grip on things. Since I can't I relax all of my muscles and just float through the water. Letting it block out the sounds around me.

I start to float back toward the top. I break the surface and smooth my hair out of my eyes. I just lie in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot. There's the smell of blossoms and greenery. The muddy bottom of the lake beneath my toes. I stand up and feel the breeze of winter. My skin crawls with goosebumps.

I splash my face, wanting to rid it of the blood that soils it. I scrub my forearm since the blood of the Outcast has soaked through. I harshly scrub up and down until its bright pink. But I know even with all the scrubbing, in the end, you can never wash the blood from your hands.

I walk back to shore and yank my uniform from the branch and drag it back into the water with me. I dip the end of the sleeve up to the elbow into the lake water and immediately, through the blue layer of water, see a milky- red substance, the blood of the Outcast leaching out of the fabric. I back away, as if expecting it to infect me.

The Outcast's last act of defiance against me.

Knowing the seamstresses' will be able to get the blood out themselves, I simply grab the uniform by the shoulders and dunk it several times until I know the spots of blood have faded enough to give the seamstresses' a little less work.

As I'm ringing out the uniform while walking back to shore, I had just hung it on the branch when a voice startles me. It was more like someone clearing their throat. I turn and find Astrid.

"Hey Hiccup," she says.

"Hey," I reply. Her are eyes flicking to the side, never staring at me for more than five seconds. Then I see the shade of pink on her cheeks, and I remember I'm only in my undergarments.

I slightly chuckle, but instead of putting on pants, I walk back out into the water to make her feel better. She watches me as I casually stroll through the water. Her arms folded over one another. Her eyes watching my every move, her cheeks turning pink.

"So, was there something you needed?" I ask.

She hesitates, "Well, I just wanted to know how you're doing." She says. But there's the sense she's holding back. And Astrid's not one

to hold back.

"I'd be lying if I said I was okay." I admit to her, to ease her nerves.

"It's everything, right?" she guesses.

"Yeah."

"Look Hiccup, can I tell you something?" she asks. I turn to her and her feet nervously shift.

"Sure." I say.

"Back when you were with that Outcast, and he was all bloody and dying, it must've so horrible and traumatic for you. I saw you become so angry that you weren't even you anymore."

"You think I'm heartless." I say searching her face.

"I know you're not. But you have to understand, for the people who love you, watching you be in that much rage and pain is really scary." Her voice shakes and I know she's being serious.

I turn away from her and face out into the open water. I peer down and see my reflection in the water. I look the different. Everyone can see it. The outside of me is relatively unchanged besides the muscles I've gained. Then there's the plump scar on my bicep where the Outcast stabbed me. I look like the old Hiccup, but not on the inside.

There's the sound of a scuffle, and I hear the water ripple. Astrid shows up next to me, still fully clothed; only her shoes are back on shore. She hovers over me, and stares at my reflection with me. Her hand gingerly touches my shoulder, then slowly drifting down to my scar. Her finger braising the skin, her thumb stroking my shoulder. My body sizzles with sparks at this motion. I don't know why, but I felt my entire body tingle; from the toes on my feet to the hairs on my head.

I turn and face her, and we stare at each other. I can just see her pulse racing, blood coursing through her veins as she stands close to me and my bare skin. I'm sure she meant to say something heartfelt and sincere. Something that will erase my fears.

Instead, she steps toward me, catches her foot against a rock on the lake bottom, and trips. Crashing into my chest, she plunges us both beneath the surface. I catch her, my hands wrapped around her arms, as we plummet to the bottom. Her hair twists out of its normal braid and floats out around me, and I stare at her while above us, the moon pierces the surface with snow white darts.

This is better than words.

I let go and she reaches for me. Twining her fingers through mine, I feel something soft warm the silence within me a little as she tangles her legs with mine until I can't tell where one of us ends and the other begins.

But this isn't enough. The ache within me pushes against my chest,

tingles down my arms, and hurts the tips of my fingers.

I pull her against me as we start floating back toward the top, and I smile. We break the surface together and the air feels alive in a way it didn't before. I smooth her hair out her eyes. When wet, it reaches all the way down her back. Suddenly I'm back at the arena, and the wedding, and the music. And Astrid looking breathtaking.

I need her.

More than I thought, and more than what I denied when I'm with Skullette.

"Kiss me," she says, and she doesn't even have time to blush at the audacity of her words before I slide a hand into the hair at the nape of her neck and tug her towards me.

I tighten my arms around her and touch my lips to hers. The kiss is rough, tastes like lake water . . . and it's the best thing I've ever felt. She presses against me, consuming me like she'll never get enough, and when we break apart, my pulse pounds against my ear and her chest rises and falls like she's been running.

Astrid looks at me like I'm precious to her. And the silence inside me cracks open, just a little. Just enough to let a small piece of hope float to the surface. I grab onto it with desperate fingers. The hope that I'll somehow manage to keep my sanity with all that's going on around me.

But after the conversation I had with Skullette back at the Cove on Berk, I can't just leave her. And yet here I am again, bubbling up Astrid with a possible false hope, that doesn't seem so false anymore. And loving someone else behind Skullette's back.

My hands relax on her waist, and she looks to me and knows, one again Skullette has ruined her moment.

"I know." She whispers.

I shake my head and tears spill over, scalding my cheeks with heat.

"I promise to always find you, remember?" she asks.

"I remember."

"I promised I would always stay by your side and protect you. You've been wounded badly because I failed to keep that promise." She says.

I look her in the eyes, feeling my heart tearing two ways. One finding Skullette. The other finding hers. "I will always love you, Hiccup. I told you I'm not afraid to save my heart for you."

My arms flex, pulling her into my chest. A brief sob escaping my lips. Her lips hover just below mine, our breath mingling in the dazzling midnight air.

"I love you." She whispers and then kisses me again. Her lips rough against mine, her breathing ragged as she devours my fear and makes

me long to feel this way forever.

But unfortunately, we need to get rest.

The walk back to the campsite, we both were in good spirits. I wave to her as she disappears into her tent and blows out her lantern. I was about to go into mine when I become aware of a conversation that I'm sure was meant to be private. Dad and Gobber. I can't stop myself from eavesdropping.

My Dad sighs heavily, like he's trying to rid himself of something that's majorly troubling him. "What's happened Gobber? What's happened to my son?" he asks. His voice shaky. My eyes widen and my hands tremble to know they're talking about me.

"I know it's hard, Stoick. But what can you do?" he says.

"I can keep him here. Until we secure the final towers." He says.

"He'll just argue against you, Stoick. And even if you leave, he'll just hop on that dragon of his and beat you there." Gobber argues.

"I know, I know." says Dad. "I just wanted to protect him from this. Shelter him from the horror that is this world."

"You can't stop him, Stocik. He's going to have to face these things when he becomes chief. And why not get him started early? Dip his toes in the water." Gobber says.

"Because he's too young, Gobber!" Dad suddenly bursts, startling me and Gobber. "This is all too much for an average sixteen-year-old boy to handle. You saw what happened to him out there. When he was with that Outcast. The change I witnessed in my own son."

"He's been through worse. He lost his own foot when battling the dragons."

"No. Nothing's worse than this. I never should've let him in the war." Dad wishes.

"Again he would've argued against it."

"It would've been better than seeing him like, this." Dad says.

"I suppose you would've gestured to 'all of him'?" Gobber says. And he manages to bring out a smile and laugh from both of us.

"What happened to the son I once knew?" Dad repeats.

"Personally, I didn't think you even knew him back then." Gobber says.

"No, I did. Maybe not how a father and son should've understood each other. But I knew him."

"And he's still there, Stoick." Gobber says, and I can see his shadow go over and place a hand on my Dad's shoulder. "Your old Hiccup is still there. I'm sure after all this is over, he'll go back to being

the clumsy, danger prone, sarcastic Hiccup we all know and have come to love." Gobber says.

"I hope so," says Dad. Then there's a long pause before he speaks again.

"Because that's the son I want back."

## 19. Chapter 19

\*\* Gone ~ James Newton Howard\*\*

\*\*I DO NOT OWN\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>A chill runs through my spine. Have I really become that cold? Am I really that different? Before I think, I spring up and sprint to my tent silently as I hear the flap of my dad's tent open. I dive in and peek out just as Gobber has left the tent.<p>

I scoot myself to the very back of the tent and bring my knees to my chest. My candle light burned out when I flung the flap open. Dad's voice still ringing in my ear like the roar of the dragons. \_That's the son I want back. \_I try to think of how different I could be. Physically and mentally.

My body's more muscular than before and my strength has grown. I have battle wounds and scars already. I'm braver. I'm more dangerous. I'm more lethal. More merciless. I slashed the throats of multiple Outcasts. I shot multiple Outcasts. I didn't even flinch. People think I'm scary. People think I'm merciless. People think I have no conscience.

My mind flashes back to when we were back in the arena. I'm lined up next to Fishlegs as I try to balance the heavy axe on my shoulder without possibly breaking it. Gobber suddenly unleashed a Gronckle. It flew around the arena, gobbling up boulders to use for ammo. I had to get a shield for protection. Tuffnut and Ruffnut are out. Then Fishlegs. The Snotlout. I ran over to a rack of extra weapons. Cowering in fear. I had attempted to move, but another blast sent me cowering back into the corner.

That's what different! I'm not just braver, I'm deadly. If I were the old Hiccup, I would've tried to find the best place to seek refuge until the battle was over. But now, I'm charging head-on like the other Vikings. Heedless of danger. Only with one purpose, and that's to kill whoever dares come my way. I'm slashing throats, shooting arrows at hearts, like it's nothing. I really am different. Dad's words, as well with Astrid's suddenly make sense.

How I've changed. How I'm becoming something I'm not. But the way I see it, is that if I were to protect the people I love, I'd have to morph myself into something that not even Alvin would recognize. I had to change for others protection. I think back to how my wanting to protect the others had led me into this nightmare. The way I see things, I had no choice. The lives of my father, Gobber, Skullette, Astrid and especially Toothless mean more to me than my own life.

It's not my fault. But at the same time, I feel a strong dysfunctional sense of urgency to show my Dad that his son is still the same. And no matter how much war there is, nothing will break his spirit. He'll still be the same. But it's not going to be easy.

The next morning, I'm discharged with Hunter to collect some food for lunch. My Dragon Conqueror suit left folded neatly in my wicker basket. Hunter's not really big on riding dragons, but we manage to compromise to where I'll fly to scope the air, and he'll take to the ground. I manage to shoot some fowl on the ride, and when we meet Hunter at a riverbank, he's caught at least fifteen fish and a gathered an enormous amount of berries. I track back the berries and string a net up to block out any predators.

Hunter's pretty cool. After a thank you for honoring his brother and giving him a proper burial, he actually does the unexpected. He hugs me. I never imagined Hunter as much of a hugger, and he probably isn't. So I allow myself to hug back and enjoy the probably once in a lifetime moment.

It wasn't until I hug back that I realize that I'm the same height as Hunter. And since they were twins, that means I'm the same height as Lucas. I know he probably isn't over his loss, and no one's rushing him. This is probably a moment of remembrance and acceptance. I feel bad being the object of which reminds Hunter of what he doesn't have anymore, but there's a bright side to it too.

If I'm similar to Lucas in ways unknown, hopefully the thought will help Hunter get through the rest of the war with a purpose, and that's to avenge his brother. When he releases me, he ruffles my hair and we head back to the trail leading to the campsite.

From there, Dad orders everyone to pack their things so move to another campsite. He says that the Outcasts could be catching on as to where we retreat to, so to keep safe, we'll be moving to another spot. Hunter suggests the river we went to for the haul, and with no argument, everyone follows.

We about a few paces in when Mildew speaks, "Are we really going to the river? A water supply is fair game. If we go there for water, so will the Outcasts. This is a bad idea."

I turn and put my hand on the holder concealing my knife. I scowl at him and arrow my eyes, hoping somehow they can burn a hole into his brain. There's a hand on my shoulder, and I turn to find my Dad.

I take a deep breath and reply through gritted teeth, "We're not posting directly by the river Mildew, we'll be a few yards away so that we can access it when our supply runs low."

He must notice my restraint and I don't know, something on my face must show him how easily and willing I could kill him if he dares complain again. So he shuts up. But speaking of complaining, Snotlout hasn't said a word like he normally does. I scan the crowd and find him walking side-by-side with his dad, Spitelout.

I haven't really gotten to know what Snotlout's dad is like, mostly because I have no interest. The only time I've ever noticed him is

when he was, in a way threatening Snotlout to win the Thawfest games. His sour attitude and intense determination made me decide not to get to close.

What else surprises me is the uncanny look they both share. Literally a chip off the old block. Not as smart or as cunning, but his cockiness is one of his best qualities since he can't learn to fight.

Suddenly wanting to think of something other than the war, I look to the sky and let my mind wander to Berk. What the people are doing. How are they progressing? Are they still okay? I feel like I've missed a lot of action on Berk since we left. But at least I left with the happy memory of the wedding.

We reach the new campsite and get to work setting up. It's around early evening when Hunter and I decide to head to the river to work on spearing fish. The rest of the Vikings join us, peckish for a little fun. Toothless is the first in the river when we arrive.

We splash and play in the river, and as I'm getting a bucket ready to get Fishlegs, soft fingers coil around my eyes and I lose my balance and drop the bucket. Skullette laughs as I tumble to the river bottom. Since were only in the shallow end, my knees stick out. As she's laughing, I spring up and scoop her in my arms.

The two of us spin and she kicks the air as I toss her deeper in the water. She breaks the surface and her hair glistens as the water ripples down her hair. I post on a rock as she sinks beneath the surface. I watch as her silhouette swims toward in a graceful motion under the glass. As she reaches the rock I'm sitting in, I can see her eyes open. She can see underwater just like me.

Her dainty hands reach up out of the water and grasp my knee. She uses them to pull herself up out of the water and he moves smoothly to my face. A sly smile on her face as she kisses my lips. My hand goes to the nape of her neck and holds her there as we kiss. By the time we're down, my lips feel puffy.

Gobber calls everyone in for lunch over on shore and we gather in with the water joining us at the campsite. We all converse and Dad and Gobber laugh. Everyone seems to be having a good time. Who knew some good old-fashioned fun was all we needed to get our spirits up.

I turn to Hunter for conversation as Skullette talks to Fishlegs. Toothless snuggles at my feet and I feed him a fresh cod while Hunter tells me some tips he and Lucas came up with when they were younger. I never knew Hunter was so cool. Mostly because we never took the time to get to know each other, but it turns out we have plenty in common and he earned my trust long before we even knew we could be friends.

Things seem fine as we're talking, when suddenly, Hunter looks over my shoulder and his grin disappears. It transforms into something I've only seen in combat. A neutral face, an unreadable mask so that no one could decipher what he's thinking. I turn in time to find an Outcast readying a crossbow.

"Scatter!" I scream. And everyone ducks and dives to the ground as

the first arrow is fired.

I scramble to get to my bag as the other Vikings charge head on, hoping to capture the crossbows since they most likely forgot their weapons. I manage to find a bow and arrows and arm myself quickly. Astrid and the others gather around me, and I toss Skullette a knife since Astrid has her duel-bladed axe with her.

I ready an arrow and when I see an Outcast charging for us, I shoot him down with an arrow in the calf and he plummets into the river. The water slowly turns red. Dad and Gobber take on four as Mulch and Bucket scramble the food together. An Outcast heading for them gets an arrow in the back of his head. He falls and Mulch thanks me as he and Bucket head back with the food. Hunter and I make a silent agreement to follow them to make sure they get there safely, and to make sure they're not leading on any pursuers. We follow them a few paces behind making good progress. Any Outcasts that arrive, Hunter takes the ones on the left, I take the ones on the right.

When back at the campsite, everything and everyone seems to be unharmed. As I'm about to go back to the raid to help my Dad, Hunter advises me to stay behind. While I normally would protest, if Hunter thinks it's too dangerous for me, then I must syst. Besides, if I was still there, Dad would've wanted me back here anyway. Hunter and I sit around the abandoned fire as the warriors fight on. There's some cheering and howling by the Vikings signaling they've managed to drive off the ambush attack.

Mulch and Bucket gather the food and prop up the tents, and as I'm gathering the remaining arrows, I look to Hunter as he stares at his toes.

"You're awfully quiet." I say.

Hunter looks up to me, "Oh, yeah."

"What's up?" I ask.

"Just stuff." He simply says.

"Like . . ."

There's a moment of silence before he talks, "It just feels like every time there's something fun in life, it's nothing more than a dream. Then the sounds of arrows and screaming forces us to wake up." He says.

"Poetic. Very poetic." I joke, and then reply. "I know what you mean I'm just glad I got to leave the island with the image of the wedding in my mind."

"True." he says. There's a pause. "What was it like?" he asks.

I jerk my head up in surprise and smile. I've hadn't realize I've been dying to tell someone about the beauty and fun of the wedding. I smile broadly and grab a stool and post next to Hunter and tell him all about the wedding, the food, the dancing (being careful not to include the incident with Astrid) and it seems like the more I get into it, the more he seems happier.



Once I finish, he's smiling so broadly, it's rather creepy. "Wow." he says. "I really wish I was there."

Feeling bad, instead of saying something like, it was really fun, I choose my wording carefully and say, "It was nice to see something happy and good on Berk."

He looks up and I see those different colored eyes. Blue and Brown. While I'm not interested in men, something about Hunter's eyes seem so attractive. Seductive. Which begs me to ask the question, "Do you have anyone special back on Berk?"

Hunter stares for a split second before saying, "No." so fast and quiet, it takes me a few seconds to figure out it's what he said.

I'm about to ask why, but suddenly his face changes again, and he suddenly charges for me screaming, "Look Out!" before I even get the chance to move. He whirls me around so his body is in front of me, clenching my biceps. His body jerks forward and there's the sound of something " most likely and arrow " penetrating the skin on his back, and possibly rupturing his spine.

"Hunter!" I scream. It rips through my throat like a knife.

He sucks in a raspy breath and as he falls, I do my best to help him land on his side so the arrow doesn't get pushed more into his back. I load an arrow and the Outcast soldier receives an arrow in the chest.

I leave my weapons in the dust and thrust myself to him. My first action is removing the arrow. And while it was simple, seeing where it landed, the damage is irreparable. I turn Hunter over laying his head in my lap. "It's okay. You're okay." I say to him, feeling excruciating bad since we both know it's not true.

His chest rises and falls in shallow breaths. I try my best to stop the bleeding, but it's pointless. And I don't even bother trying to make hollow promises I can't keep.

"Hiccup," he says. His hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it's me who's dying instead of Hunter.

My throat releases some tears and they slide down my cheeks. Wild sobs choke my neck. "I'm sorry," I utter. "I'm so sorry." I begin to sob and tears pour out endlessly. I lean down and press my forehead to his, and I shudder at how cold it is. "I'm so sorry." I whisper.

I hear a breath and I lift my head up to find Hunter, smiling, at me. He squeezes my hand and mumbles, "Don't be. Don't be sorry," he says in a raspy voice.

"But it's my fault." I gently counter. And it is. It always is. Whenever there's a life lost, there's no one to blame but me. These people are giving their lives for me, and I hate it. My vision gets blurred and when I squeeze my eyes shut, more tears pour down my cheeks. I hold onto him as long as I can.

"It's not. It's not. If anything, I owe you." He says. The tone dying

in his voice.

"Why?" I say through a sob. But his eyes have closed. "Hunter! Hunter can you hear me?!" I scream in desperate attempt to get him back, I'm not ready to say goodbye. Thankfully his eyes lazily open.

"Because of you, I'm not afraid." His tone fades at the end of his sentence, and I know time's running out. I can feel him in my arms, holding his last breath. Now he speaks no louder than a whisper. "I'll be with Lucas. You never could keep us apart for long." He jokes, even in his condition. I laugh a little desperately as I feel his skin become ice.

The only thing I can do is talk with him, let him die peacefully, rather than call Mulch and Bucket to get my dad and try to prevent the inevitable. "What are you going to miss?" I ask.

"The winter." He replies. "So beautiful. A world of fragile things."

"What would you do? As a kid?" I ask.

"I would, play with Lucas, and my parents. We-we'd have a snowball fight, and build snowmen." He whispers."

"Sounds like fun." I choke out.

"Thank you, Hiccup." He says, and I feel my heart sink.

"For what?"

"You're a wonderful boy. And I will never forget you. Be strong. Fight hard." He tells, me.

Then his eyes flutter shut and I listen as he releases his last breath.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down his cheek, one entering the small corner of his mouth. I'm hoping he can taste my mourning, love and respect for him in that tear. I feel Mulch's hand on my shoulder, and I coil up over Hunter. Not wanting to leave him. We were just getting to know each other, but even I know that I've made his days in the war, the best he's had despite his heavy loss.

The only tiniest sense of pleasure I have is the thought of Lucas and Hunter. Laughing. Calling each other. Hunting. Hugging. Reunited.

Mulch doesn't make me move, not that I would listen. Instead, he lets me sit with Hunter's body until Dad finally returns with Gobber and the others. With one look from Mulch to me, he knows the worst has happened.

I'm still unable to move. My legs too weak to bear my weight. I simply just stroke Hunter's hair until three Viking men gently move their hands under Hunter's body, and tentatively lift him from my lap, as if he's sleeping and they don't want to wake him up.

Several sets of arms open to embrace me. Skullette. Astrid. Gobber.

Dad. But I don't accept any of them. I only hve one goal for tonight, and that's to remember Hunter.

Tonight, we honor Hunter with a traditional Viking Funeral.

I stand close by as men position Hunter's body so he's lying flat on his back, then they position his hands so one lays over the other. Then the men slowly fold each section of the cloth over until Hunter's entire body, and face is unseen. But I can still see his face through the outline it makes in the cloth.

Gobber has readied a long wooden board to place Hunter on so we can float him out to sea. But with no sea, we'll float him down the river. It's the last place he was happy here on earth anyway.

I stand next to my dad as Gobber instructs the men on how to position Hunter's cloth-covered body. One man drizzles some kind of jell-like substance around Hunter's body, then another takes a torch and the entire board blossoms in flames.

There's a small whispering above me and I look to see my dad, singing. It's a Funeral song that only our parents knew. Their children never heard it before since they always had funerals away from home. Dad taught it to me one day, so I wait until I'm ready to join in.

"\_Dark the stars, and Dark the moon.\_

\_Hush the night and the morning gloom. \_

\_Tell the horses and beat on your drum. \_

\_Gone their master, gone their son.\_

\_Dark the oceans, dark the sky\_

\_Hush the whales and the ocean tide."\_

I decide to join in.

"\_Tell the salt marsh and beat on your drum.\_

\_Gone their master, gone their son.\_

\_Dark to light, and light to dark. \_

\_Three black carriages, three whites carts."\_

Skullette joins in as I walk over and place Hunter's bow at his side, cautious not to touch the flames, but I doubt that pain will hurt as much as the one I currently feel.

"\_What brings us together is what pulls us apart.\_

\_Gone our brother, gone our heart." \_

Gobber and the men push Hunter's body out down the river, and it peacefully floats as the flames crack. I watch as the moon has settled on the horizon. Almost as if it's waiting for Hunter to come to the end of the river.

"\_Hush the night and the ocean tide. \_

\_Tell the salt marsh and beat on your drum. \_

\_Gone their master, gone their son."\_

Hunter's body soon floats out of sight. It's as if everyone takes a deep breath at once, then there's the sound of some sniffs and sobs. Then everyone's attention turns to me. It's like they're all expecting me to fall apart and beckon for someone to comfort me. But also, I was the one who watched Hunter pass, so they're probably wondering how I am.

But I don't know how to react. Let alone break down in front of them. While I do want to cry, while I do want to have someone to hold, I clamp my lips tight and hold it in. All I want is to go to bed and forget about today, and Hunter.

That night I dream of Lucas and Hunter. I dream of a world where Alvin and war don't exist, and everyone I love and know are still alive and intact.

We're in a forest. A white forest since it was winter. I'm back on Berk. Back home. Running through the woods with Hunter and Lucas. There must be at least five inches of snow, but I don't feel cold.

I'm running through the woods, looking for Hunter and Lucas in the white forest. I come to find Hunter hiding in a hollow tree. The space is bigger than it looks. I walk in ducking my head so I don't hit it against bark of the tree. Or maybe the tent flap.

I'm not in I'm not in my tent. I never was.

The fur on my sleeping bag feels warm. Like my green tunic I always wear. Fresh and knew thanks to mom. But now I don't know the woods anymore. The paths are wired. I'm lost. Hunter and Lucas are lost. I don't know where the winter sun went. It's colder now. Cold and gray and the air feels damp.

As I awaken to the new morning, I hear the faint wailing of a grief-stricken boy. His screams tearing at my throat looking desperately for a way out.

It's not me. It can't be me.

But it is.

## 20. Chapter 20

When I open my eyes, it's around dawn. Eight seconds before the realization of Hunter's death sinks in. I feel sadder and lonelier than ever. Knowing I had to leave my dreamland where there's peace at all sides. Knowing that this is the real world, and that Hunter and Lucas aren't with me anymore.

It feels like there's liquid lead in my veins, and the heaviness infuses my whole body. I've lost the will to do the simplest tasks,

to do anything but lie here, staring unblinkingly through the tarp of my tent.

I miss out on breakfast, and no one comes to get me. For several hours beyond that, I remain motionless. Toothless sticks his head in my tent and purrs to get me to move. But I stay still. I think for a moment he thinks I'm dead. But when he walks into my field of vision, and sees my eyes open, he licks my face, but still I just wipe it away and remain lying on my side.

He wines, but when he knows he's not going to get me to budge, he simply circles me and lies down next to me. Laying his head next to mine. His breaths come smoothly, brushing my face. My hair.

Finally, Dad comes to the front of my tent and opens the flap. "Come on Hiccup, we're having a war meeting."

With that in mind, I push myself into a sitting position. But that's as far as I get. I have to give myself commands just to do simple tasks.

"Now you have to stand up, Hiccup."

So I stand.

"Now change Hiccup."

I pull on my old clothes and fold my uniform and place it next to my sheath of arrows.

"Now you have to go outside, Hiccup."

I push the flap of my tent aside and step out with such robotic motions. My face neutral.

There's a small dusting of snow on the ground. Looking around, everyone's gathered, the only persons missing was me. I take steady steps toward the fire pit. As if suspecting that if I take one unbalanced step, I'll fall over and won't be able to get up.

I want to put my best face on for everyone, fake a smile and just pretend. But what's the point? I'm just putting off the pain, nothing's ever really going to help change it. My eyes can't seem to focus on anything except for the ground in front of my feet.

I don't look up. So when I see the ground start to fade to black, I look up but only focus on the fire pit. I feel too tired to talk. So take a seat next to True, who I almost never talk to.

Not only have I even bothered to try, but now I don't want to. Every time I get to know someone, it costs them their lives. Hunter and Lucas were just the beginning. I don't plan on losing anyone else. And apparently the only way to do that is to keep everyone at an icy distance.

As I sit down, out of the corner of my eye, I see a salmon on a stick. I see Gobber handing it to me. I take the fish, but I don't say thank you or even smile. I feel too weak to even do that. I simply place it over the fire, letting it roast until I want to give it to Toothless. Everyone's quiet, but I don't say

anything.

Skullette sits next to me and places her hand on my knee. I don't react. She strokes it and I don't brush her off or even put my hand over hers. I just stare at the fire, putting all my concentration into roasting the fish. Knowing no one's going to get me to speak anytime soon, Dad starts the meeting.

I barely pay attention. Just another proposal on how to invade Tower 2. Then there's the final Tower and the small city of the Outcasts. Nothing seems to register except when I hear my name then I tune in for a split second. My thoughts drift to how I'm going to keep everyone alive. Because so far, I have epically failed. Lucas. Hunter. Two already dead from our squad.

All who's left is Gobber, True, Skullette, me and my dad.

While I'm not talking for today, I'll start again soon. This is just a simple mourning process. It'll get easier as the day goes on. But what's even worse is that this whole loss with Hunter isn't helping me show my Dad that the old Hiccup is still there. But now, not even I know if he's still there. It's like he's slowly deteriorating into nothing as the deaths go on.

What's going to happen if he's gone? Will I still be the same? Will I be someone no one even wants to be around? Will I lose my mind?

Maybe I already am. I feel crazy enough. And maybe no one has the heart to tell me.

Once the meeting's over, I toss the salmon to Toothless and get up and leave the meeting without a word. No one stops me, and there's no sound of pursuers. I walk through the dead woods alone, no bow, no knife. I just want to walk, and hope that my emotions will let loose so that I can get on with my mission to help my dad capture Alvin so I can end him.

I wander aimlessly, lazily brushing my hand over branches of bushes. Nothing happens. I don't cry, I don't break down, I don't even mourn.

Why not?!

Why can't I let my emotions out? I'm alone. \_No one's here!\_ I scream to myself. Why can't I let go? Am I subconsciously not supposed to? Am I getting used to the rocks at the bottom? My heart goes numb, but the loneliness stays the same. That's the price I'm bound to pay.

I manage to find a tree with a sizable trunk that I can easily hide behind. I just sit down and bring my knees to my chest. There's a weird nagging feeling that if I talk, then maybe it'll encourage my body to let go. Maybe by showing that I haven't lost my voice, it'll remind myself I'm still alive. But maybe I'm supposed to be strong.

Am I?

It wouldn't be surprising. I guess I've somehow tricked my body and mind into thinking that I'm not allowed to show any weakness since

I'm the Dragon Conqueror. And any sign of weakness will show Alvin I'm easy prey, and he'll undoubtedly and easily come in for the kill.

But every fiber in my being screams at me to let it all out. If I don't there's also the chance I could go into some state of shock. It's like I want to let go, but I can't. And I just keep wandering in a circle on what I'm supposed to do and how to react.

I hide my eyes in my arms and take deep breaths. Nothing happens.

"Can't seem to let go, huh?" a voice says. My head jerks up to see Mulch. Small bits of his beard have a light little frost on them but his smile can be seen through the thick, frozen hair. I don't reply, instead I focus on my breathing. Steady breaths.

"Never thought you would ever be at a loss for words, Hiccup. Rather strange." He says. I stay quiet. "Look Hiccup, I know you're hurting, and I know you're just being strong for everyone. But remember our talk back on Berk?" he reminds me.

I do. I was crying since I couldn't save the patients at the hospital. And I thought I was weak, but Mulch said I was crying because I've been strong for too long. And now, I want to cry, but I can't. Is the pain not harsh enough?

"Remember, you don't always have to be the rock of every depressing moment." Mulch says. "There's really nothing anyone can say to make it better." I listen closely, hanging on his words. If he can help me before, he's not about to fail me now. "No, being strong is not always the right option. There's only just one way."

"What's that?" I utter.

"Let it hurt." He says, and I give him a confused look. "Let it bleed. Just let it take you right down to your knees." He says tapping my knees. "Let it burn to the worst degree. It may not be what you want, but it's what you need." He says.

"Why?" I ask quietly.

"Sometimes the only way around the pain is to let love do its work. And let it hurt. You might just find you're better for it, when you let go and you learn to let it hurt." He says with an informative tone. Like he's teaching me a life lesson.

There's a moment of silence. I think about his words. I turn away for a moment, and then when I turn back, I open my mouth to say something.

Then I burst into tears.

So much for being strong. And yet, there's the strongest sense of relief.

Mulch sits down next to me, his arm wraps around my shoulder and rubs my back as I unleash wave after wave of sobs. There's a brief moment of when I somehow begin to rock back and forth, but Mulch just keeps rubbing my back until I'm cried out.

"Thank you." I say when I'm finished.

"For what?" he asks softly.

I take a few shaky breaths before I talk, "For helping me." I take another shaky breath. "And for not, like telling me to stop it. Like stop crying." I say

"Well what would be the point in that? Telling someone not to be sad because someone has it worse, is like telling someone not to be happy because someone has it better."

"Thank you." I repeat.

"Of course, Hiccup." He replies.

After I'm all cried out, I can't even describe how much better I feel. We decide to head back to the campsite, and I don't even care that my eyes could be red. I greet Dad hello before I get my knife from my tent, then head over to Skullette's tent. I push aside the flap and find her brushing her hair. She turns and smiles at me.

She stands up and hugs me, wrapping her arms around my neck. I hug her torso and take in her sweet scent of lavender. Astrid usually smells like citrus and midnight jasmine. Wait, why am I even thinking about her? I push her out of my mind and after talking with Skullette, she gathers her bow and we decide to go hunting in the woods. Toothless begs to come, and we allow him.

I quickly retreat to my tent to retrieve my cloak, and once she gets hers, we run off, feeling such a sudden sense of freedom by running. Feeling like schoolchildren running home after the bell has been rung. Toothless not too far behind.

When we reach a clearing, we're heaving, but we're smiling. We settle by a creek, and while we obviously haven't shot anything, we spend the time together. Talking. Smiling. And yes, kissing. Toothless giving us a sense of protection.

By the late afternoon, she's once again in my lap. Her head on my shoulder, just carelessly playing with our fingers. Intertwining them and stroking the skin on mine. I take a deep breath, feeling so warm and relaxed. I press my lips to the crown of her head, and once again the scent of lavender floods my nose.

Her emerald eyes perk up to me and she smiles. I smile back, and my stomach is warm. We kiss each other again and she even giggles. The sound makes me smile broadly. And yet I find myself, almost waiting. Because every time there's something peaceful or joyful, something related to the war snaps us back.

Nothing happens. And I feel so overjoyed, but I don't let it consume me until tomorrow. I'll celebrate then. It'll be a record if nothing happens. Skullette and I walk back, holding the other's hand. Talking nonstop and oddly enough, nothing's about the war. It's like we're having a normal day back on Berk.

The snap of a twig scares us both.



\_I knew it.\_ I think.

We both stand back to back. Circling around as Toothless growls in all directions. I pay close attention to him since his hearing and instincts are far better than mine. His ears twitch left and right. Pressing back then forward trying to hone in on the sound.

Before any of us knows it, a small burlap sack is harshly slammed on my head and I'm yanked forward.

Ambush.

I scream a muffled scream and I hear the muffled yell of my name by Skullette. I try to decipher what's happening as I'm blinded by the fabric.

Toothless roars, infuriated. And as I can see his dark silhouette hurdle toward me, a bola whizzes in the air and I hear Toothless scream the same scream he made when I shot him down with my own invention. The ground shakes as his body slams into the dirt.

"Toothless!" I scream. But it's so muted.

My hands are not tied, but actually being held by sausage fingers. I can hear Skullette paring with at least three men, based on hearing the metallic clangs of their swords against her bow. She seems to be winning.

I try to fight the men holding me so that I can help her. I assume the Outcasts holding me are right behind me. I lean forward and whizz my head back, ramming it into the nose of one of the Outcasts. He grunts in pain and his hands release me, and I use the opening to spin and kick the other in the head.

But more hands consume as I try to fight off the web of hands that appear out of nowhere. The more I fight, the more hands appear. And they keep grabbing at my cloak so I can't run far without them stepping on it, and chocking me harshly and effectively. If I can't help myself, I can help Skullette and Toothless by leading the Outcasts away from them. I head Skullette get hit in the stomach and possibly sucker-punched in the face.

I hear her fall to the dirt and I try to free myself to help her, but the grip on my hands doesn't light up.

"We've got him! Let's go!" One Outcast commands.

And then I feel my hands cuffed by bigger hands once again, and I'm pushed in different directions as I head Skullette call to me with a weak voice. She'll never save me in time. She's too weak. I can just see small red spots of blood on her pale skin. But she painfully pushes herself to her feet, and stumble forward a couple steps with a hand outstretched. As if thinking she can somehow pull me back toward her with her mind.

But finally the effects of the battle take hold on her, and she falls to the forest floor.

The Outcasts mumble and talk in cocky voices, feeling so empowered

now that they've captured me. I expect the worse and just result to killing myself before they even get the chance to deliver me to Alvin.

We walk for several minutes into an unfamiliar part of the woods. I try to see the world ahead of me, relying on nothing but the outlines of what I can make out ad trees, rocks, more trees, and a dark circle. The closer we get, the more I can tell that it's an opening. To something. Like a hall or hideout.

Terror rips a white-hot path through my body, and I can barely breathe. Strong fingers reach out and grip my arms and shoulder. They lift me and I flail uncontrollably as my feet try to find the ground again. Being blind is the scariest thing.

My feet pound something, and it's wooden. I try to feel and I hear the creak of the wood again. I nick my toe on another piece of wood in front of me. Stairs. Steps. Leading to something. Normally I would shrug off their hands, but since I'm blind and don't know what I'm getting into, I grip their hands as they guide me.

I'm walking up with three Outcasts soldiers on my heels. Then I'm harshly shoved through the dark arched doorway, and it takes the clicking of my prosthetic leg on the wood to help me realize, I'm in a wagon. We take three steps into the wagon before they let go of me with a shove that propels me backward further into the back of the wagon.

My knees threaten to collapse beneath me. I stumble over the edge of my cloak and crumple to the floor, twisting my body in midair so I land with my back to the exit. The burlap sack covering my head is yanked off, letting the fresh air infect my nose. The light's temporarily blinding, but once everything focuses, it reveals a covered wagon that's supposed to be mule-drawn, but instead, Outcast soldiers pull it.

The canvas covering dilutes the evening sun into something dim and gray. An Outcast guard braces himself against the back of the wagon and stands, sword drawn, blocking the exit. Foreboding fills me, an oily poison that makes me feel queasy.

It takes a few seconds to notice the cloth-covered lump leaning against the far wall of the wagon. I don't know what's under the cloth, but it can't be good.

Even worse, across from the lump, casted in the shadows is a figure. I push myself back and scoot back, but keeping my distance from the Outcast guard. The figure rises and walks forward, casually. My stomach lurches and I think I'm in the danger of vomiting.

"Hello Hiccup." He says in a raspy voice. Once the remaining sunlight opens up his features, I just about go numb.

I'm alone, with no help in any way shape or form.

I find myself backed into a corner as I stare unblinkingly at Alvin the Treacherous.

I want to scan my surroundings looking for a possible escape, but I can't tear my eyes away from the lump. There's something horribly familiar about its shape, but I don't want to put it into words because it isn't possible.

It can't be possible.

I look at the cloth-covered lump and dread pools into my stomach. It's just the right size for a person. I look at the person shrouded in the cloth and try to find my voice, though I have no idea what I'll say. I don't have to. Alvin speaks first.

"Have a seat." Alvin moves past me, knocking me into the wooden bench lining the wagon wall behind me, and settles on the opposite bench, right beside the lump. His sword drawn.

"This'll be a whole lot simpler if you just listen." He says coldly, his smile sending shiver down my spine. "Agreed?"

I robotically nod my head. I don't think I'll be able to talk anyway. My tongue feels frozen. Making speech next to impossible.

"Now Hiccup, as you may now well know, I am your islands most feared enemy. I've earned that title well over the years. But now I have a problem. A problem that began the moment you spared my own soldier. And now, not even my most loyal men will trust me."

I remain quiet, reading myself for him to strike. But I also can't help but listen to his words.

"It's had me question on whether I should even let you live, or if I even need your dragon secrets." He continues, biting every word so I won't miss it. "But alas, only you hold the power to end the war. Any move I make will be questioned by my men. Now, they'll only listen to you."

"Why not just kill me now?" I challenge. "You have me trapped. Just finish me and be done."

Alvin laughs a mocking laugh. "That would be easy, but I need your secrets, Hiccup. Otherwise this whole war will be all for none. But that . . . and that your punishment for turning my soldiers against me, must be paid in a more severe manner."

He smiles and drives his sword into the lump. Whoever is trapped beneath the cloth sucks in a raspy breath and moans. Blood blossoms beneath the cloth and spreads like a fast-blooming rose.

My breath leaves me as if I've been hit in the stomach. "Who is that?"

Oh please, oh please let it be a stranger. Another soldier. Another object lesson. Please. Don't let it be my dad. Gobber. Astrid. Skullette. I can't lose anyone else. Not now. It's too soon.

Alvin ignores me. "I don't like Stoick. Never have, and never will. Safe to say I don't trust him. I don't trust you, either, but you have a quality they seem to lack."

I can't look away from the blood, and I feel a scream clawing for freedom at the back of my throat.

"Do you know what it is?" he pulls his sword free, and the person beneath the cloth twitches. "It's loyalty."

I can't breathe. I try to stand, but my knees won't hold me, and I crumple to the splintery wagon floor.

\_No\_

Ignoring Alvin, I crawl toward the person beneath the cloth. I'm nearly there when Alvin drives his sword into the wagon floor, inches from my face.

His voice is harsh as he bites each syllable into pieces. "Your Viking men aren't loyal. They think they are, but if you out them to the test, they'd fail. Their own agendas will always be more important to them than anyone else's'. Humans are just naturally that selfish."

My breath catches on a shuddering sob, and I try to crawl around the sword. It nicks my shoulder as I pass, and Alvin laughs.

"You on the other hand, are loyal to a fault. You won't scheme, manipulate, or betray. Not if it will cost you someone you love." He yanks his sword free of the floor and slides it into the blood-soaked lump again. "No, you'll go to the ends of the earth, do everything that's asked of you, ignore your own ethics and instincts, as long as you get to save the one you love."

\_Skullette\_

No!

It can't be her. But the possibility is extremely high. She was the only one there when we were ambushed. They must've captured her and dragged her here to bribe me. No, no please. Please, let me be wrong.

I've reached the cloth and am tearing at it with shaking hands while the person beneath it moans in agony.

"Please." I can't loosen the cloth. "Please!" I look at Alvin, and his smile twists into a grotesque parody of mirth.

It'll be his soldier. A guard. Someone who means nothing to me. I can't bear to be wrong.

I can't bear to lose Skullette.

"Allow me to help you." Alvin says in a voice filled with malice. Pulling his sword free again, he slices through the cloth and splits it top to bottom.

I snatch at the pieces and yank them free. A scream builds in my chest as I stare.

Not Skullette.

Not a stranger.

Mulch.

\_Mulch.\_

He's supposed to be back at the camp. Safe. He's supposed to be, but he isn't.

How? How did they get him when they attacked me? Unless.

They attacked the camp. I'm slammed in the stomach by nothing. But I lose all my air, and my heart pounds in my ears.

Mulch looks at me, sadness and pride mingling with the love he's always shown me, and then moans again. I come undone.

"No, no, no, no, no." There's so much blood. So much. It pours from his chest and covers my hands, splashes on my green tunic, and I can't stop it.

I can't stop it.

"You shouldn't have messed with my soldiers, Hiccup." Alvin says, his voice as hard as the wagon floor beneath me. "You were disloyal, and now it's cost you."

I would say I was never loyal to Alvin in the first place, but it feels like my voice has been pulled from my throat. I can't say anything to him, but I somehow manage to speak to Mulch.

"It's going to be okay," I tell Mulch. Tears burn my eyes, and I have to blink to see him. "It's going to be okay." I lie, because I don't know what else to do. It's like I'm back with Hunter, only this time, it's much worse.

Because now I can't cry anymore. He was the one person I could cry in front of. The one person I could go to for refuge. What's going to happen now?

He tries to speak, but blood bubbles from his lips instead. I grab the cloth and press it against his chest with both hands.

"It's going to be okay." I say again, and press harder, though I don't know how to make my words true.

Mulch shakes his head slightly and tries to raise his arm. I grab his hand with mine and wrap my fingers together. His hands swallow mine, though now his skin is like ice.

"Save him," I beg to Alvin. "Please. Get him to a doctor. I'll do anything you want. Anything."

"Yes, you will," he says. "Because if you don't, I'll kill your little girlfriend in ways the citizens of Berk and Outcast Island will remember for decades."

"Girlfriend?" I look up, tears obscuring my view of Alvin's face. "I don't understand. This is Mulch. I want you to save \_Mulch\_!"

"Oh, it's far too late for him," he says and, with a flick of his wrist, drives his sword through Mulch's neck.

The scream inside me rips through my throat. I reach for the sword, but it's already gone. Throwing myself on Mulch, I shove the cloth against his neck and beg for him to look at me, though I know he can't.

He can't, and he never will again. Wild sobs choke me, and I can barely find the air to let them loose.

Rough hands grab my arms and pull me from Mulch. I scream and beat at the person behind me to no avail. The wagon stops, and two more guards enter, scoop Mulch's body up inside the cloth, and haul him out. Tossing him into the forest unceremoniously. The guard holding me tosses me to the wagon floor and exists as well, leaving me huddled at Alvin's feet.

He crouches to my level, Mulch's blood still glistening on his blade.

"You will go to your father, and claim a surrender tomorrow."

I star at his sword cross my arms over my chest, and rock back and forth.

"Are you listening?" he grabs my chin with his hand, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Pay attention. Everyone's life depends on it."

My teeth are chattering, and my body shudders, but I make myself nod. I can't lose anyone else. I can't. I just can't. Whatever it takes to get them off of Alvin's kill list, so help me, I'll do it.

"You will go to your father and claim a surrender. I've seen the way my soldiers look at you and your spirit. You're their Savior. No doubt they will listen to you with the proper reasoning." His smile flickers at the edges. "What that is, I'll leave to you."

I'm too numb to argue. To wonder how he thinks I'll convince an entire army to surrender after we've had a roundup of victories. To argue that they'll think I've gone mad and will not even listen to me even though I am the Dragon Conqueror.

"When you convince them, and you will, you will travel to our little town on our island and where I will declare you an Outcast, and part of my army. I still need your knowledge of dragons, of course. That's too valuable to waste." His voice lowers. "If you don't do so, your loved ones will be tortured and killed."

He lets go of my chin and runs his palm across my cheek, tangling his fingers in my neck hair. "Do I make myself clear?"

I nod, a wobbly, uncertain movement, and watch the blood slide down his blade.

"Until tomorrow," he says, and then he's gone.

The wagon lurches forward again, and it takes a moment to realize I'm not alone in the back. One of the guards is sitting on the bench behind me, holding a paper-wrapped package in one hand and a damp

cloth in the other.

I scoot as far away from him as I can without touching the puddle of Mulch's blood seeping slowly into the floorboards. When he ignores me, I wrap my arms around my knees and try not to let the agonized wailing I hear inside my head leave my lips.

Mulch is dead.

\_Dead\_.

He'll never give me another cod again. He'll never be there to catch my tears when they fall, or gather any food, or take care of Bucket.

Bucket!

How am I going to explain it to him? To anyone if I even find my voice again. With Hunter's death still weighing heavily on my shoulders, this only makes things worse.

The truth is too harsh to touch, and I shy away from it before it sears itself into my brain and becomes real. If I can't feel, I'm not alive, I'm not real. Instead I find a quiet place within myself where once again, Alvin doesn't exist, my family is still intact, and I'm not covered in anyone's blood.

My own little backdoor out of this life. A world where love, dreams and darkness all collide. Maybe if I try hard enough, I can leave my broken world behind.

The harsh kneeing inside my head becomes muted â€" the grief of some other boy. Not mine. I rock, holding myself as I'll fly into a million pieces if I let go.

There's nothing in my head but a severe longing to be like Mulch. I don't want to feel anymore. I long to be like Mulch. Lie cold in the ground like Mulch. There's room inside for one more.

The guard says something, but I can't hear him. If I listen to him, I might hear the grief-stricken wail of the boy who just lost something precious. Grieving. Lost and bleeding.

He slaps me, but I can't feel it. He says something else, then crouches down in front of me and scrubs my face with rough persistence. When he pulls back, the damp cloth in his hand is covered in bright red patches, like little crimson flowers decorating the fabric.

Bile rises at the back of my throat, and I tear my eyes away from the cloth.

He removes the string on the package he carries and tears off the paper. I don't look to see what he has. It might be covered in red too.

He's talking again, louder this time. His boots dig into the hard wooden floor beneath us as he stands. I catch a glimpse of crimson staining the edge of his right sole, and tuck my head toward my chest.

My chest is covered in rusted-scented crimson.

Covered.

I beat at it. Tear at it with frantic fingers. I have to get it off me. I have to.

The guard helps. Rough hands tear away my brown vest fur coat, unlace my tunic, and I claw my way free. I'm panting harsh bursts of aid that fill the wagon.

He attacks my skin with his red-flowered cloth again, and I twist my body, trying to get away. I don't want him to touch me with that thing. I can't stand to have it touch me for one more second.

He drops the cloth. In its place, he holds a new tunic that looks just like my old one used to look. Pure green. Crimson-free. Just green. Green. Green.

Green symbolizes life, nature, fertility, well being. Green is the color of nature, fertility, life. Grass green is the most restful color. Green symbolizes self-respect and well being. Green is the color of balance. Green is a safe color.

I let him slide it over my head. Let the rough linen threads scrape against my skin. Maybe if they scrape hard enough, I'll forget. About the crimson. About the awful wailing I still hear inside me.

About what I just lost.

The guard pulls me to my feet and fumbles with the laces on my dark green pants, but I don't help him. How can I? I'm not really there. I'm home, back on Berk. My small little island. I'm home, in the town Square, sipping lemonade while my family is close by, just out of sight.

He says something, but I don't hear him. I'm too busy listening to the deep rumble of men's voices coming from the Square.

My pants puddle around my ankles, and he lifts me out of it.

The lemonade I sip is the perfect combination of tart and sweet. I want to share it with my family, but they stay just out of reach.

He pulls new pants over my legs. Dark green, just like the one he removed.

I wish they were light blue like the summer sky I see from the Square.

I'm sitting on the wagon's bench.

No, I'm sitting on our rocker.

My shoe is gone.

It's summer. I don't need shoes.

Now, it's back again. A stranger is tying it. Which is silly, because



I can tie my own shoe. If I want to. Which I don't because the summer sun is hot, and I'm too tired.

I'm so tired.

The stranger grabs my prosthetic leg and starts to polish and buff it. A kind gesture, but my curiosity prevents me from thanking him.

He wraps my cloak around me. No, it's a blanket, because I'm cold. Which is stupid. The summer's so hot.

I stop rocking on the chair in the Square. Or maybe the wagon stops.

I'm not in a wagon. I never was.

Hands lift me up and set me down on a faded dirt road. I stare at my boot. It's the same color and design as always, but the scuffs and creases are gone as if they never were.

Behind me, a wagon clip-clops away. I don't turn. I don't know where the Square has gone. Where the summer sun went. It's cold now. Cold and gray and the air feels damp against my face.

Someone calls my name, and I look up to see Astrid, her bright blue eyes full of fear, beckoning to me from the border of the campsite. Others rush behind her to join her at the sight of me. As I turn and walk toward her, I hear the faint wailing of the grief-stricken boy grow louder and clamp my lips tight to hold it in.

## 22. Chapter 22

I'm huddled on the floor, pressed against the cold, stone wall of the Dragon Academy. Toothless is sitting near me, watching me, crying.

After Astrid had found me walking toward the campsite, just one look at me and everyone knew something was wrong. I was rushed back to Berk with half of my team and the other young dragon riders. I don't know how I survived the boat ride, but the minute we landed, I vaulted over the edge of the boat.

Someone called me, but it didn't register. I ran off the docks and sprinted through the village until I was behind the blacksmith's shop, curled up on my hands and knees. It doesn't change a thing. My pointless escape has done nothing to subdue the wailing of the boy inside me. Even worse, Mulch is back on the horrid place.

The memory squeezes my stomach with such force. And my throat tightens until I'm desperately gasping for breath, as if I'm being strangled. I want to go back. Go back and find him. But it won't matter. They tossed him to the forest floor. Where that could've been? Anywhere. He should have a proper burial, but he isn't going to get it.

The words taste like ashes. I'll never lay Mulch to rest. Never say the words he deserved to hear. Never bring flowers to a sacred patch of ground set aside for Mulch alone.

I wanted to let it out, but screaming would indicate my whereabouts, and I just wanted to be alone for the time being. I had to ball up the front of my new tunic, and stuff it in my mouth. But nothing happened. I didn't scream. And when I remember it's new, the reason why it's new comes back, and I began to gag. I coughed it out and just resulted to rocking like I did before.

Gobber found me later found me later. And they'll find me soon again. I snuck out of the house early this morning, and it's early afternoon.

Sure enough, the heavy gate of the Dragon Academy opens, and dad, Gobber, Skullette, Chief Boggs, Astrid and the others show up. No one can process this. They've never seen me like this.

Toothless looks up and stands up so Skullette can take his place.

She crouches on the floor beside me. She looks into my eyes, and I can just see my reflection in them. Nothing but glassy shock in my eyes.

I can just see her heart sink. "Hiccup? Hiccup. What's wrong?"

I'm rocking back and forth as if I need this simple rhythm to keep myself anchored. What's wrong? Don't they know what's wrong? Wait, no they don't. For all they know, Mulch was dragged away and captured by the Outcasts. But the fact that only one person was captured out of how many they could've taken should've raised a red flag. For all they know, he's just being tortured for information.

If only he was that lucky.

"Can you tell me?" Skullette asks. I can see her mind racing.

My lips tremble, and I clamp both hands across my mouth.

"Hiccup?" she asks, but I'm not listening.

"Skullette, maybe you could tell us what happened." Dad says.

Skullette doesn't leave my side as she explains her side of the story. "Alvin and his Outcasts ambushed us. They took Hiccup."

Panic erases all rational thinking from everyone's heads.

"Where'd they take him?" Dad asks, trying to keep his voice calm for my sake, though I hear the edge beneath it.

"I don't know. They knocked me out before I could stop them."

My eyes flick to Astrid, and I can see her fists clenched tight, and she results to biting her lip to prevent herself from saying every foul word she knows to Skullette. I know she's furious. Skullette didn't fight hard enough. But who can win in an ambush attack when it's seven on one?

The only thing keeping her from screaming and yelling is the sight of me, huddled in a fetal position, in some state of shock.

"How long was he gone?" Chief Boggs asks.

"Over an hour." Skullette concludes.

"And then when he returned, he was like this." Astrid adds.

Fierce anger surges through my father. He can't speak or he might release it on those who don't deserve it. Instead, he turns back to me. Even a chief knows when he's in over his head. He can't fix this. Can't understand where to begin making it right if he doesn't have all the information. And I can't bear to tell him.

"It's going to be okay," Skullette whispers so no one else can hear her. "You can talk about it with Mulch soon. He can help."

\_He's dead!\_ The boy screams.

I rock faster, banging my head against the wall behind me. Everyone stares at me in excessive horror. Dad lunges for me, wraps his arms around me, and pulls me against him. Skullette leaps up as he came forward, and backed up, feeling the upmost guilt since she made things worse.

Dad whispers promises he doesn't know how to keep in my ear. And yet the attempted comforting gesture alone gives me a little peace. I quiet into an unnatural stillness that I'm sure scares him more than the rocking did.

"He hasn't spoken since he returned?" Fishlegs asks, and Astrid and the others shake their heads in unison.

Even Snotlout looks to me in horror and pain. The look on his face; wishing he could somehow make it better. Never knew he cared.

Dad meets my tear-filled eyes and makes another promise he won't know how to keep. "We'll get him to speak soon. He just needs to go home now."

Tightening his arm around me, he guides me from the Academy and into the weak afternoon sunlight shining through the clouds. I know Dad's eager to get back to Outcast Island so he can have someone to attack. The rage I can sense within him begs for a target. The fact that the real target is the most fear enemy of Berk makes no difference.

But I have to tell dad that Alvin is still mine. He has to be in order for me to give Mulch and Hunter the justice they deserve. So that I can have my arrow slice through his heart and have his body fall still and bloody at my feet.

Gosh, even my thoughts have changed. They don't even sound mentally stable. Maybe I'm not even mentally stable anymore. So much for my plan to show dad that I'm unchanged.

"We'll be taking you home, son." He says to me, though he doesn't get a response. Not that he's expecting one. "Will it be too difficult to walk?"

I don't respond to that either. They're about to pick me up, the feeling of being lifted brings back the memory of Mulch. And the

wagon. And the sword. And the cloth-covered lump.

And the crimson.

I push myself to my feet, and they watch my gait carefully. But if I had been violated, I would've had trouble walking.

I walk with wooden steps, my eyes on the ground. Despite the evidence that physically I can handle the journey, they can't bear to put me through it. Gobber leaves, but then comes back with a wheelbarrow. It's Bucket's. I guess they thought the experience would be fun. But it only reminds of what unsaid news still lingers inside me.

I stand still, looking at their feet, and Gobber whistles to get my attention. I jerk away from Dad at the sound, and tremble.

His heart hurts as he gathers me to him again. "It's okay, Hiccup."

I lean into him, close my eyes, and breathe deeply. He presses his chin to the crown of my head, and watch as Gobber readies the wheelbarrow.

Wait, I'm still going?!

Dad tries to tug me toward the wheelbarrow, but anything wooden and on wheels only brings back the memory. So I dig my heels in and pull against his arm.

"You don't need to walk, son. You can take a ride home. It'll be easier on you this way."

I tug harder, eyes widening.

"It's okay, Hiccup. You know you can't fly. And you usually love a wheelbarrow ride." He says. And something inside me breaks loose.

I twist free of his arm and take off.

They race after me as I cut through the Town's Square and fly into the Plaza. They're fools. No duh Alvin picked me up in a wagon. He wasn't going to hurt me in the woods where they would soon discover me.

I turn a corner and slide into an alley. The only one who follows me in time is Toothless. And he follows just in time to see me stumble and fall toward the dirt. Lunging forward, he catches me, twisting his body so that he lands on the road beneath me. My breath crapes his ears in harsh pants, and I'm shaking from head to toe.

He wraps his wings around his body, cocooning us both, just like he did when I had fallen into the burning flames of the Green Death. His breaths soft and warm on my moist forehead. I feel a sense of brief protection and comfort. His pitch back wings encasing me from the world, his front legs gathering me in his chest. As if he knows how breakable I am.

Soon the sound of dad's heavy footsteps reaches the corner, and Toothless' wings break away along with my protection. Now I have to settle for Dad's as he gathers me to his chest and say, "I'm sorry,

son. I'm so sorry." His voice breaks, and he has to swallow hard to get the next few words out. "I didn't know he had you in a wagon. I was trying to spare you the long walk home. I'm sorry."

Everyone else gathers, except for Gobber who probably took the wheelbarrow back to the animal farm, and Fighlegs and Snotlout since they know they won't be useful now. I feel unbelievably fragile in his arms. And now he doesn't know how to get us home without hurting me further, and his options are limited.

The sounds of a large group of men, swords most likely drawn, block the mouth of the alley. The middle one smiles wide enough to show gaps where his teeth should be and, and says, "Give us your money and no one gets hurt."

For one brief, blazing second, I feel Dad tense. His senses honing the rage blistering through him into something he can use to obliterate the sorry excuses for human beings who dare threaten us now. It wouldn't be hard. They sound like drunkards. Probably shaking already from withdrawal. Desperate to have just enough money for their next drink.

As comforting as I'm sure the idea is, I guess the confrontation isn't worth it. Or he could if he didn't have to worry about getting me home.

Gobber tosses a small handful of coin away from me and Dad and we walk out of the alley as they scramble across the filthy dirt and mud to snatch it. Looking back, I see the men and freeze. They were former Outcast soldiers. This is what they've been doing with their lives since we gave them freedom?!

Gobber's about to coach me on his exit strategy when I suck in a raspy breath, and my expression goes from blank to feral in a heartbeat. I push against Dad's chest and twirl to face the men. Dad turns, reaching out a cautionary hand to me.

"Hiccup, they just want money. I'll take care of it."

I don't listen. Shoving his hand away from me, I curl my lip into a fierce snarl. Before anyone can stop me, I whip my knife out of my belt, raise it above my head and rush toward the men.

"Hiccup, no!" I hear Dad grab for his sword as the men brace themselves for my attack. I know he's racing for me, but he's too late.

Aiming for the man in the middle, I duck beneath his raised sword arm and launch myself into him. We both slam into the dirt street, not having time to see whose hurt worse. The other four men are attacking Dad and the others.

They block, parry, thrust and slice, but I know they can barely focus. I am screaming, harsh bursts of sound that flay the air. Dad slams the butt of his sword into the man closest to him, whirl to block a blow from the other.

I rise from the inert body of the first man, my eyes desperate and wild, and I race over and jump on the back of the man Gobber just hit. I press the tip of my knife into the soft tissue beneath his

throat, and he raises his arm and drops his sword in surrender.

The man Skullette's fighting glances at us, and Skullette takes advantage of his distraction to lower her shoulder and body-slam him into the mold wooden wall beside us. The man punches my knife hand away from his throat. The tip gouges his skin as it goes and a steam of blood arcs through the air.

I watch it and come undone.

The man throws me to the ground, but I kick his legs out from beneath him, and scrabble across him that terrible scream still ripping its way out of my throat as I punch, kick, and try to stab him with my knife.

Astrid yells my name until her voice goes hoarse, but I can't hear any of them, and the two of us are too tangled up for anyone to intervene without injuring me. All they can do is wait for the first available opportunity, and watch in horror.

I take the man's blow like they're nothing. Digging my nails into his skin as if it's a wall I have to climb, I claw my way up his body. I slam my knife hilt into his forehead, rendering him nearly senseless, and flip my weapon around and drive the blade toward his neck. An unknown power of dominance germinating inside me. Having a sense of power over this man.

Skullette knocks me off him from the side before my blade finds skin, and I sprawl on the dirt, my knife skittering across the alley. Traitor! But the impact of the hard packed ground has left me weak and shaking. Feeling helpless, panic sets in.

I need to get my knife.

I push myself up to my hands and knees and crawl toward it.

Leaping ahead of me, Skullette reaches it first. Grasping it she turns and approaches me carefully. My eyes are that of a panicked animal cornered and fighting for my life. My voice is nearly gone from screaming. I reach for my knife, but Skullette holds it away from me.

"Hiccup," she breathes my name in a voice full of pain.

I look at her, my eyes still glassy from shock, and reach for my knife again.

"They just wanted money," she says in that soft recognizable voice that could always snap me back to my senses. "Just money. You don't need your knife."

Something's wrong. My nerves grow rather than calm down at the sound of her voice. The need for my knife grows. And I can't stop my thoughts from swirling. The thoughts that scream she's wrong. The thoughts that say I do need my knife, and that I'm never safe unless it's in my hands, drenched in someone's blood.

I shake my head and whimper. Skullette slowly extends her hand that doesn't hold my knife.

"I'm sorry." She says.

I don't respond.

It's a hollow offering in the face of what I've been through, and I don't intend for it to be the best she can do. But for now, all she cares about is getting me home.

"I don't know what he did to you, but killing someone else isn't going to make it better. We're going to help you up. That's all we're doing. Can we touch you?"

I look down at myself and start shaking again as the memory of Mulch's blood staining my hands returns. Skullette and Astrid pull me to my feet, though I'm not sure I can stand on my own now. I'm trembling uncontrollably, and I can tell everyone wants to rip Alvin into tiny little pieces and light each of them on fire.

Skullette tucks my knife in her belt and Dad scoops me up in his arms.

"We're taking you home, son." Dad says, though they no longer hope for a reply from me. "We'll figure out what to do from there."

Good.

And they will. They have to.

### 23. Chapter 23

My throat is still raw from the screaming I unleashed at the men in the alley, and I can't stop shaking. I don't know what's happened to me, and I don't want to talk about it. Not yet. No one seems inclined to talk either, or maybe they all realized I'm not going to answer.

We walk side by side through the Plaza while a breeze plucks at whatever leaves remain on branches and tangles my hair, and the shadow of the day slowly stretches east. Slowly our numbers dwindle as everyone heads home.

When we reach home, I leave Dad and Gobber standing in the living area while I lock myself in the bathroom, draw myself a bath, and strip out of my garments. I slide into the bath and sink beneath its skin. It's quiet, the outside noise muffled and distorted by the water around me. I pretend I'm in a cocoon, asleep, the world passing me by, and when I wake, all of this will have been a bad dream.

The water's cooling when I finally decide to shampoo my hair and attack my skin with soap. I scrub until it hurts and I'm glowing pink. But I'm still convinced the crimson stains me deep within where no soap will ever reach.

The memory of Mulch, holding my hand with icy fingers while life spilled from his chest, is more than I can bear.

I comb through my water-heavy hair and it sticks to my scalp in damp strands. Pulling on a simple shirt and old pants, I open the door

just in time to see Dad chuck a chair across the room. Landing inches from my feet. Then slams his fist onto the kitchen table and swears viciously.

I cross my arms over my chest and move to curl up by the fire pit. Closest to the staircase in case I want to sprint to my room. He meets my gaze with misery and fury in his eyes.

"Ah, hello son." He starts, and then awkwardly clears his throat. "Do you need anything?" he asks, and I know he's asking about more than food and water.

I shake my head, but Gobber stands and brings me a cup of water and a plate of goat cheese, dried apple slices, and a hunk of oat bread as if I never responded. I take a bite of apple to please them, but I can't taste it.

He kneels himself next to me, closer to me than the other end, but still keeping a careful distance between us. He's moving slowly as if he's afraid he'll spook me at any moment.

I want to tell him about Mulch. I want to open my mouth, let it all come gushing out, and find solace in weeping. But the words I need to rip Dad's world to pieces won't come. Instead, I take a tiny bite of cheese and concentrate on chewing. Out of my peripherals, I see Dad glance over at Gobber, then take a deep breath.

"I want to talk to you son. It's okay if you don't want to respond, but I need to know you're listening." He says quietly, and waits.

I swallow the cheese, take a sip of water, and set it all on the stone bordering of the fire pit. I owe him this.

I owe it to Mulch too.

The thought draws blood, and my eyes slowly fill with tears. I'm tired. So tired. I ache, inside and out, and nothing seems simple anymore. Nothing seems right.

"Alvin said something to you, did something to you," he says, waving his hand toward my old clothes. His voice is hard. "You don't need to worry, Hiccup. We're going to go to Alvin. We're going to destroy his army, then we'll bring him back here, and you can give him the justice you want him to have. He'll never get a chance to touch you again."

His expression is haunted, and I know he blames himself for today. I don't know how to comfort him when nothing soft and conciliatory lives inside me anymore.

Something catches my eye, and I turn to see my Dragon Conqueror suit hanging on the back of a chair. Dad follows my gaze. I stand up and walk over to it, approaching it from the side, as if it'll attack me. I run the fabric through my thumb and index finger. I see Gobber's fingers curl into a fist.

Beneath my grief, uncushioned by my shock, a hard kernel of anger takes root and burrows in. I failed Mulch today, yes. But I don't have to fail him again. A debt is owed for his life, and I intend to pay it.



I glance around the cottage and find my knife, cleaned and polished, lying on the kitchen table, inches from my Dragon Conqueror suit. I want to hold the weapon, to feel like I have some way to keep the promises I've made to myself, but I don't know how Dad feels about giving it to me.

Or anyone for that matter.

"You can't attack everyone who pulls a weapon," Dad says when he sees me gazing at my knife.

He's wrong. If you don't attack first, you lose everything.

Everything.

"You scared me today," he says softly, and I look away from the knife. "They'd already demanded our money. The swords we just to intimidate us into giving them a way to buy their next drink. It was a situation you could've talked your way out of with your eyes shut. Instead, you tried to kill them."

I can't look away from the worry on his face, even though I want to tell him I've learned my lesson. The lesson he tried to teach me when he made me promise to strike down Alvin if he ever threatened me. It's branded deep into the fibers of my being now, and I don't plan to act like it isn't.

"How can I trust you to carry your weapons if you don't know who deserves a death sentence and who doesn't?" he asks, and slides next to me in the next chair over. When I look back to the suit, he stands up and wraps his arms around me in a hug, pulling me into his chest. "Hiccup. I should've been with you today. I'm so sorry."

It's not his fault.

I should've killed Alvin. I should've entered the wagon and attacked without hesitation.

I should've kept my promise to Dad. If I had, Mulch would still be alive.

A small whimper escapes me, and tears spill down my cheeks. I try to tell him. To make the words come, but sobs choke me instead. My fingers are icy, trembling as Dad guides me to my bedroom. He tucks me in and leaves as Toothless nestles down next to me.

I stare out of my skylight, watching the sky darken as tiny stars tear holes in its velvet surface until I cry myself to sleep.

The next morning, I sneak downstairs and ruffle through the pocket of my Dragon Conqueror suit until I find the arrowhead that was given to me by the Outcasts who aided me when I was invading the tower.

I roll it through my fingers. Playing the words he said to me. About shooting straight and that this'll take him down. I still haven't figured it out yet. And as much as I want to, I just can't. I don't know why.

A voice from behind startles me, "Nice to see your awake."

I turn and find Dad, who looks like he just got up considering he's smoothing down his hair. I nod, not knowing what else to do.

"I've been thinking. About yesterday."

Mulch. I have to tell him. Now.

I struggle to talk, but Dad silences me with his "Stop" hand that I've seen him use in meetings to quiet people before he talks. "Please. Just listen for a minute."

I stop struggling, but tension coils within me.

"I don't know what happened. But I need to tell you, to convince you, that if he . . . if there was anything . . . if he hurt you in the way a man can hurt a child, it wouldn't change how I see you. He can't break us, Hiccup, unless we let him.

I lower my head and go back to rolling the arrowhead between my fingers. "I also want to make a promise to you. Will you look at me?"

I lift my head and stare into his eyes. He raises his hand and strokes the side of my face. His touch is far gentler than his words.

"I'm going to make Alvin pay for what he did, Hiccup. I swear it. And if he dares lay hands on you today, I won't stop until he's dead."

This kind of response will ruin everything. All Alvin needs is one tiny excuse to take my Dad and friends away from me forever. And I'm about to tell him something that will make his anger so much worse. Suddenly I realize this is what Alvin's banking on. Dad will try to protect me from Alvin, and I'll blindside him with Alvin's plan. The only one who benefits is Alvin.

Unless Dad knows.

The shadows of grief and loss can't obscure the startling clarity of this thought. I feel like I've emerged from a long slumber, awake and ready to act.

I'd be a fool to take Alvin at his word. I have to protect my Dad, and everyone else I love, and the only way to do that is to trust him the way I promised him I would.

"Now listen, I need to head to the Great Hall to discuss the next maneuver for the war. Would you like to join us?"

I think about it, and I realize I'd be better if I talked about it in front of everyone, so they know why I acted out, and why I haven't been myself. I nod and follow dad to the Great Hall.

The walk through the Plaza was gut-wrenching since everyone stared at me. No doubt the news of what happened yesterday spread like wildfire. We walk up and two men open the giant double-doors. We walk in to find Skullette, Astrid, Gobber, Fishlegs and everyone gathered

together.

Eyes go to me, shocked, alarmed and on edge as I follow Dad to the head of the table. He goes through some war plans and strategies were bounced around the crowd. During that time, Skullette walk up next to me and takes my hand.

Suddenly I feel so much more grounded than I did when I first came here. To know that she still loves me, and cares for me, even after everything that's happened and how I've been treating her, just wants to move me to tears. I pull her close and she naturally hugs me and lays her head on my chest.

Dad purposely avoided bringing up anything that had to do with me, though I bet it's the one thing everyone wants to discuss. Once he starts to discuss about the city and how they plan to invade, I snap back into the conversation. Now's my chance.

My voice is still horse from the screaming I did yesterday as I look dad in the eyes and say, "Alvin has a plan, dad."

He looks to me with mixed emotions on his face since these are the first words I've spoken since . . .

Skullette lifts her head in relief and happiness as joy overtakes her face at the sound of my voice. Everyone's faces register happiness to hear me speak.

I force myself to continue. "He told me when he-"

My throat closes as the memories hit. Being inside the wagon. Mulch. Crimson everywhere.

Dad reaches up and places his hand on my shoulder. "Listen to me, Hiccup. You can take this one piece at a time. We're in no hurry. Tell me about what happened. We'll start from there."

"He wants me to claim a surrender to him, today."

"What for?" Dad asks. And I can almost see the gears in his mind working.

Everyone's faces show surprise.

"He wants me to claim a surrender, so that when we go, to the city, he can claim me as an Outcast."

"So that he can have you as part of his army. . ." Dad starts.

"And he'll have me and my knowledge of dragons." I finish. "He said . . ." Greif surges through my chest, burning a path to my throat.

"Tell me."

"He's going to kill you." Suddenly the words are there, rambling over themselves in a rush to be heard. "He said I'm loyal to a fault, and I'll do anything to avoid having him kill someone I love."

The wagon bed. The cloth-covered lump. Crimson everywhere.

I can't breathe as the blood-soaked image of Mulch burns itself into my brain and stays. Pushing away from Dad, I rush to the double-doors, wrench it open, race across the stone steps and fall onto the grass, retching.

He's behind me in seconds, rubbing his hand on my back. Then people gather around me as I vomit.

When my stomach is empty, he helps me sit on the bottom stone steps, while Gobber goes into his house and returns with a glass of cold water and a sprig of mint.

I chew on the mint and sip the water in grateful silence, but it's a brief reprieve. He needs the rest of the story, and I have to find a way to give it to him. The sight of Bucket twists my stomach to the point where I have to hold my middle to dull the pain. I would've resorted to rocking, but that would've discouraged them into thinking they're not going to get much more out of me.

Then I'll never be able to tell them. So I need to tell them now while I still have the strength.

Skullette sits beside me, her shoulder touching mine, and says quietly, "Did he claim to have your father killed?"

I shake my head and set the glass down before my hands drop it on their own. "He took me. In a wagon. There was a cloth-covered lump. And he said we were scheming against him behind his back." My voice rises as I rush to get through it all. "I thought it was you. I thought he'd taken you." I gesture to Skullette. I thought he'd taken you, and I prayed it would be a stranger. Another guard like the one in the tower. But it wasn't."

My voice trembles. "He stabbed the person beneath the cloth, and there was blood everywhere, and I tried to reach him, but I couldn't." I reach a hand out for Skullette, for absolution or for comfort, I don't know. "I couldn't save him. I thought he was safe, waiting for me back at the camp, and I didn't save him. I'm so sorry!"

My voice breaks, and I drop my hand as terrible awareness comes to Bucket's eyes. "Mulch?" he asks in a voice that begs me to lie. To make the truth something he can still fix.

I don't do anything as I begin to sob again. When I calm for a few seconds, dad asks, "Son?"

I nod.

Everyone stares at me, eyes glassy with shock, then dad jumps to his feet and strides across the Plaza. When he reaches a sparring area, he takes a vicious swing and sends Bob flying along his wire. Minutes pass as Dad pounds his fists into Bob as if by obliterating the dummy, he can obliterate the truth.

Some eyes turn to Bucket to see his reaction, but from the looks of it, the news hasn't settled in. Either that or he's in denial. Gobber secretly talks with some other Vikings to assign a new guardian for Bucket. But all he does is walk away, wide-eyed.

He doesn't get far, though. As dad finally drops his arms, they both fall to their knees on the grass. I go to Bucket and lay a hand on his shoulder. My father's condition is concerning, but the fact that I know that he was more concerned with me than Mulch, urges me to comfort Bucket first. Turning to me, he wraps his arms around me and drags me against him.

I hold him and vow I will make Alvin hurt for what he's done to us. When Bucket's finally lifts his face to me, I can see he feels the same. His eyes are haunted, his expression hard.

"I'm sorry." My voice is small against the weight of our loss, but it's all I have to give.

Dad slowly approaches us as I help Bucket to his feet. "I can't believe he's gone." His voice chokes on the last word and he scrubs his hands over his face.

"Where is he?" Bucket asks so innocently it stabs my throat.

"I don't know."

"They took him away in the wagon?" Dad asks.

"Guards came in and took him." I can't look at them. I can't bear to see the shadows in their eyes. "They just . . . dragged him away."

"I want to see him. I want to . . ."

Say good-bye. Say the things he now wishes he'd said the last time he saw Mulch. I don't know if it would make it any easier, but I know he, they, need it. I do too, but we aren't going to get it. We aren't going to get another word to say on the matter that doesn't involve the sharp end of a sword.

"He should have a proper burial." Bucket says. I look down and almost flinch at what I see.

I no longer see a Viking. No longer a warrior. All I see are the desperate eyes of a young man, who'd just lost his father, and now wants nothing but this simple act of kindness. And he can't even have that.

"Yeah, but he isn't going to get it." The rods, taste worse than they sound. Bucket lowers his head, eyes squint, on the verge of crying. I rush to get the words out. "He isn't going to get it, but he can have \_justice\_. If we work together."

I place a hand on Bucket's shoulder again, and he looks to me in the eyes. I can just see the tiniest glimmer of hope ignite in his eyes. I make sure Dad meet my eyes and say, "You can't claim a surrender, or Alvin will turn it against us and separate us."

"But how do you suppose we can use his plan against him?" Gobber asks.

"I'm not sure if we can." I admit.

I think back to the original plan of coming to Outcasts Island. My plans to join the army. I joined to help protect the people I care about. If Alvin were to toy with them, he'd have to face me first.

As for coming to the Island; I came to help Dad and the others take over the Island one tower by one. Then once we captured the city, if we did, we were going to drag Alvin back to Berk so that I can kill him. In the arena. In front of the entire village.

Now, he wants me to claim a surrender so that he can brand me as an Outcast, and therefore have my knowledge of dragons.

I try to incorporate both plans to my benefit.

I could go to Alvin and claim surrender, then when he's not expecting it, I'll assassinate him on the spot. Down-side: He won't be taken back to Berk, and there's the possibility my opportunity will come later when we're all in dungeons, or even killed. And the guards could also stop me in time, and Alvin will end up killing me instead.

Astrid's tried to pull a surprise attack before, and it epically failed, but it wasn't a bad effort on her part.

We could storm the city, secretly, since they'll probably be expecting me to surrender. Then lay siege to the entire village. I don't think Alvin could have an escape route or secret bunker. And with the dragons, things will be made easier.

We could also try and set up a trap. I would lead Alvin out of the city, after trying to attack him if we went with surrendering. Without their leader, the Outcasts won't know what to do. But Alvin's too smart for that. And yet, something about the plan seems like it could work, but why?

I don't know, but we might even have to mush them together.

I look to dad and the others, their eyes look fierce. "Come on." I say.

I lead everyone back to the Great Hall, where everyone sits in around the fire pit as I explain my plan. "We're going to go to the Outcast City and pretend to surrender. From there, the dragons will fly overhead, distracting Alvin and the others. I'll try my best to take him down as we invade the city. But the really important thing is those buckets of Monstrous nightmare saliva. Gobber?"

"The last shipment went out about a week ago. So they all should be there and ready for use, thanks to our undercover Outcast members." He clarifies.

"Good."

"Wait, you said you'll try, to keep Alvin busy." Astrid interjects. "What does that mean?"

"Astrid, I know I can't stand against Alvin unless he's chained and/or tied. I mean, you've tried and he caught you. I can't make promises I can't keep." I say.

"Now the barrel's will have to be spread out in these specific places for the entire city to catch." I say as I gesture to spots on the map "From there, either Alvin will come after you, or me. Either one he chooses will lead him to the Cliffside, where we'll have an ambush team attack and tie him down. Just like you and Gobber did that day they invaded." I motion to Dad.

"But what happens if you get caught?" Chief Boggs asks.

I look down for a minute. What will happen? Will everyone I know die? Will I die? If I do, I'll die a hero.

"I'll keep fighting Alvin until my last breath." I say to him hardly. Then I turn to the crowd, making sure to eye Skullette, Dad and Astrid. "If something, goes wrong, you are all to flee the city and retreat back to Berk."

"Hiccup . . ." Astrid's about to argue, but I stop her with my hand raised in the air, as to say, 'Let me finish.'

"Listen to me; I joined the Viking army so that I could protect the people I care about. If you just come and attack Alvin if he has me, it'll be all for not. I want to die knowing I saved the people I love. That is a victory for me. And if I die, you can't let my sacrifice go in vain. You have to avenge me, like I'm going to avenge Hunter and Mulch, and all of our other fallen men."

I can feel the energy rising in the room. A small clap begins at the back of the crowd, and then slowly makes his way up to the front. Soon men are cheering and pounding their chests.

Dad adjourns the meeting and as we're walking, he places a hand on my shoulder, "Son, I, I'm so sorry you had to see Mulch die."

"No, I'm sorry. If I'd just killed Alvin like you said-"

"This wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it is. Dad, people are dying because of me. Dying to protect me. And I joined so that I could prevent that from happening." I argue.

"No, no, no, son. It wasn't your fault. It wasn't mine. It was Alvin's. And one day, I'll make him pay for it in full."

"No, one day \_we'll\_ make him pay for it in full." I say.

"Yes," he says, holding my shoulder. "We will. Starting today."

## 24. Chapter 24

I don't want any lunch, but I agree to eat something when dad points out that I can't execute our plan on an empty stomach. But the knowledge of what I've lost burns within me. My heart aches, a constant pain that makes it hard to breathe. Losing Mulch is like losing a part of me. The part that forgives and forgets. The part that shows mercy. The part that lets me shed a tear when the pain is

most grueling.

I don't know how to move forward without him, but I have to. I have to put my plan in motion. Go to Alvin and fake out a surrender. Attack when he least expects it. Signal the dragons to fly over and fire. Bring Alvin down.

The only sure advantage I know I have is that he probably thinks I'm broken so badly he's already won. I can't wait to prove him wrong.

I go home and change into my Dragon Conqueror suit. Then strap my sheath of arrows and my bow. I look down and realize I still have the berries in my hidden pocket. There for the purpose if I were to get captured. So even if this plan were to go wrong, and I end up getting thrown in a dungeon, I could easily eat my way out of it before they even get the chance to torture me.

Strangely, this thought comforts me.

As I'm adjusting my boot, Dad walks up the steps into my room. "It's time son. The boats are ready." He looks at me up and down and almost frowns. I know the fact of bringing me back into battle isn't the most pleasant idea. Especially after what I've been through. But I need to do this if Mulch is to get the justice he deserves.

At the docks, I adjust Toothless's saddle before we take off. I take a quick look around and notice that Bucket's not with us. I ask around and Gobber pulls me aside and says that shortly after the meeting, the realization of Mulch's death finally hit. And it hit hard. With half of his brain left, he went mad. He allegedly ran off by himself and hid. He's too unstable to fight in the war.

My heart gets stabbed then sinks to my stomach. I clutch my chest and back into Toothless who leans his head into my shoulder in an attempt of comfort. I place my hand on his snout for balance. Mulch, dead. Bucket, mad.

I want to go see him. And I'm about to do it, but Dad grabs my shoulder. I look to him with desperation in my eyes. He frowns and turns me to face him. "We can visit him later. Right now he needs rehabilitation. We can visit him when he's, safer. I promise."

Safer? He's not safe. Not anymore. He's harmless whether mad or stable, or if he even had a full brain. If he can survive without half his brain, I assumed he can survive without Mulch.

But compared to the way I reacted, times ten. Twenty. Forty. I'm dead wrong.

I might not even see Bucket again if this plan is to go wrong. So I should go see him. Then again, he could look to me and see that it was my fault since Alvin killed him to scare me, and Bucket could see me as a threat and take it out on me. Though I highly doubt it.

But nonetheless, I agree with dad to visit Bucket later. When I ask who's taking care of him, he says that Goathy has taken the responsibility. I feel a little better since she's the best choice that I can think of. But no one knew Bucket like Mulch.



There was just something about their friendship that seemed deeper than just being a guardian or a therapist. It's like me and Toothless. Something so much deeper. Much more meaningful.

I file away a personal promise to visit Bucket. If I ever see him again.

The fly seemed too short as we approach the shores of Outcast Island. We land the dragons a few yards from the city so that they can hear the signal while still staying out of sight.

Even from the air I can see Mildew among the group. The sight of him boils my anger to the brim. But he's not my main priority. I lead the army to start the walk to the Outcast city. I pull my hood up over my head so it conceals my face, like I'm trying to look elusive. On the way, Skullette joins me and locks our fingers together, and together we walk to the city.

Once we reach the outer perimeter of the city, the wall bordering around it comes into view. We reach the iron gates which have doubled in size compared to the ones at the tower. As expected, two guards are posted outside. I try my best to look defeated as Skullette releases my hand. I walk up to the guards. My hood obscures my eyes from the guards, and I keep my cloak wrapped around me, but still make it obvious that I'm in my Dragon Conqueror uniform.

"I'm here to see Alvin." I say. The two guards look at each other, and one reaches forward and yanks my hood down before I have time to flinch. I lift my head and look them in the eyes.

They smirk, now knowing why I'm supposedly here. They step aside and open the gates while one orders one posted in a turret to alert Alvin. The other guides us to where Alvin is. As we walk in I put my hood back up. To give myself a little comfort, I keep my hand on the butt of my knife. Just to remind myself I have something to protect me.

As we're walking I peer out from my hood and see all eyes on us. Since they can't see my face, the face of my Dad and Gobber probably give off hints. I look ahead and see that he's leading us to the supposed Great Hall of the Outcasts. An active volcano with fresh smoke emanating from its mouth. Not too far from it is gallows. With nooses still swinging in the cold breeze.

I shudder and feel for Skullette's hand. She takes it instinctively. I think back to a legend of a man who was accused of murder, and when was getting ready to be hanged, he called out to his lover, and told her to flee. To run away.

The thought scares me, but at the same time, when I got older, I couldn't help but think as to why. Normally people would think he told her to flee so she wouldn't have to witness his execution. Reasonable. But I kept thinking, if they were truly, madly, deeply in love, is it possible he was telling her to run and join him?

Would he rather have her commit suicide than to live a life without him? Or was it so that she wouldn't have to suffer by living a life without him? Did he really care about her so much that he wanted her to leave this hell on earth? I'll never know the answer.

The grip on my hand tightens and I look at Skullette. She's become whiter than normal, and fear swims within her eyes. I look ahead and see we're headed straight for the gallows. I dig my heels into the black-soot dirt.

"Wait, where are we going?" I ask.

"Keep moving." The guard orders.

"Where are we going." I repeat coldly. Determined not to move until we get the answer.

The guards about to start something when Alvin's voice rings out across the air. "Ah, Hiccup! So nice of you to join us!" he says.

I look up and see him standing on the stage of the gallows. Then it hits me. The gallows are located at the town's square. If I'm to surrender, Alvin wants it to be as public as possible. I release Skullette's hand even though I know she needs me now.

As we walk closer to the stage, Alvin walks down with a smirk that says, "See what happens when you follow my orders?" The sight makes me want to spit and slash his jugular.

He walks up and wraps his thick arm around my shoulder. If it weren't for my cloak, the heat from his body would scorch my skin. I can feel Dad readying his sword at the sight of Alvin laying a hand on me. I turn back and motion him to calm down.

"So nice you could make it, Hiccup. And I want to know that you're doing the right thing." His voice lowers into a voice only I can hear. "Believe me."

His breath reeks of old yak meat mixed with the smell of the singed hair on his beard. My nose wrinkles in disgust, but he doesn't take notice. As he leads me to take my spot on the stage, guards escort Dad and the others to the front of the crowd.

Armed guards enter the square and fan out, stationing themselves at three-yard intervals along the edges. Behind them, twelve other guards march through the Square, two by two. The lead pair reaches the stage, halts, and pivots to face each other.

My mouth goes dry, my pulse pounds against my skin, and my vision narrows until all I see is Skullette. I keep my eyes locked to her as I take my place on the stage. My cloak still coving most of my uniform. Alvin meets my spot on the stage, and when I gaze at him from my hood, he turns and meets my gaze and smiles at me as if only the two of us exist.

My skin crawls, and something hot and sharp seeps out of my grief and begs for his blood.

Alvin walks ahead of me to greet his soldiers and as he talks through, what I suspect to be a beginning speech, I scan my line of soldiers. When I get the sense he's done, I notice the soldiers break formation and circle the stage. They expect trouble. They expect Dad to draw his sword against Alvin and give them a reason to act.

I'm grateful they're all prepared to play their parts.

I look back at Alvin, at the sly, feral smile. I wish for this to be over quickly. As I walk toward the front of the stage, toward Alvin, my legs feel like saplings in a storm, the poisonous anger spreads within me.

"And so, I present . . ." he moves his head behind my head and yanks my hood back, exposing my face to every soldier in the Square.

"Hiccup, the Dragon Conqueror, heir to the throne of Berk!" Alvin's voice booms across the Square.

This is the man who shattered my life.

The man covered me in crimson.

"Now, Hiccup, are you willing to claim surrender to Alvin and the Outcasts?" his tone mocks me, and I struggle to breathe.

This is the man who took my friend. Hunter. And wants to take Skullette too.

"I am." I say.

Alvin laughs, a hideous parody of mirth, and drops his head back. He probably thinks someone will see this as an opening, but everyone stays quiet.

"I will proclaim you as an honorary Outcast, and with that your family will be freed to return to Berk." Alvin says.

Alvin looks to me, and the cold daggers of his eyes chill me. I press my arm against my side, feeling the weight of my knife bite into my hip. He smiles and wraps his hand over my arm and squeezes. In front of me, I see Skullette change her stance, rolling to the balls of her feet.

Heat sears a path through my brain, and I shake off his hand before I think better of it. He looks to me, then to Dad and the others, and my stomach sinks. If it's not the idea of handing me over to Alvin that'll drive Dad insane, it's the fact that he's so close to me. It's possible that's what he wants. To provoke dad into attacking by being too close for comfort.

"Of course, there's the matter of an initiation into becoming an Outcast." He says, and my eyes widen and my heart speeds up until I'm certain it'll pop out of my chest.

"What initiation?" I ask.

"Well, it depends on the person, but we always have a new soldier do some form of initiation to prove himself to be an Outcast." He tells me.

I'm floored. He never said anything like this, and I have no idea what to expect. Fear clouds my thoughts and I really hope that Dad or Gobber thought of something to get me out of this. But judging from the looks on their faces, they won't be able to think of a plan in time.

There's the sound of a scuffle, and I turn to my right and see two guards haul Skullette onto the stage. My heart pounds my ears and I rush to her and help her up; but the minute she's on her feet, Alvin yanks me back and draws his sword. He drops it to my feet for me to use.

"Kill her." He says.

I look to the sword, to Alvin and to Skullette in obvious shock. I stare at the sword. I try to think of a plan, which involves tricking Alvin into thinking I've killed Skullette, but besides the fact that it'll involve them dumping her body somewhere we won't easily be able to locate it, he's too smart for that. And everyone, including him knows that.

"You do want to become an Outcast, don't you, Hiccup?" he speaks with quiet menace and lays his hand on me again, digging his fingernails into the soft tissue of my forearm.

I pick up the sword, weighing my options, but all of them deny even trying to fake kill Skullette.

I can't do it.

"No." I say, and fury explodes on his face.

I'm sorry Dad.

He twists my arm and yanks me forward, breaking my hold on the sword. "You realize what this means don't you?" he asks in a voice only I can hear. "I will kill everyone for your betrayal, Hiccup. Renounce this surrender and leave as planned, or I will leave you will nothing."

"Let go of him, Alvin." Dad's voice, laced with terrible purpose, rings out across the Square.

The crowd erupts to a frenzy of hushed conversations, and Alvin twists my arm until I'm sure he means to wrench it from its socket. Pain is a living thing clawing at me, and I turn my face to look at my Dad.

I need to know the plan. How to keep everyone alive and avoid being separated from them. I expect to see steady calculations in Dad's eyes. Instead I see blind fury. His hand is already reaching for his sword as Alvin drives me to my knees.

He's going to attack Alvin. Try to kill him. And Alvin will stab a sword through him the way he stabbed a sword through Mulch and then laugh while I sit in silence, soaking up every drop of blood until my skin is flushed crimson with the shame of my impotence.

Without warning, Alvin's meat hand releases my arm, but then grabs something even worse, and that causes more pain.

My hair.

He gathers my entire front gathering of hair, and some from the crown of my head. He manages to snag a few neck hairs, which hurt the most.

The pain is so severe, it swipes away any form of clear thinking inside of my mind. All that matters is the pounding I feel as Alvin's grip plans to pull every strand from my follicles.

He drives his hand downward until I'm on my hands and knees, resembling a bowing position, keeping my head low. Tears sting my eyes, and while I hear Skullette scream my name she's held back by the same guards who brought her to the stage.

The only way for her to suffer. Watching me get harmed, and nothing she can do will help me.

The brilliant rage surging within me coalesces into one fierce purpose.

Save everyone I love.

The pain of my hair rips through my brain until I feel lightheaded. Tears sting my eyes, and I clench my jaw so hard my teeth grind together. A new sound comes from me. A mixture of a sound from the back of my throat, mixed with the muted wailing from the pain through gritted teeth.

"I want to be an Outcast!" I blurt, my voice catching at the end so it skips an octave. The pain of my head prevents me from blushing in embarrassment. Each word drops to the ground like a stone. I pray dad will understand.

"What?" Alvin asks, forcing me to repeat. Even though we both know everyone heard it. And I can feel his voice, seeped with a vicious triumph.

"I want to be an Outcast."

"And you will deny your father's current authority over you?" he asks.

"I do."

Gobber isn't looking at me. Dad's locked on Alvin, who still has my hairs locked in his grip. Pinning me so that my back is curved in and I'm digging my nails into the moldy wooden boards to ease the pain to no avail.

Dad's hand grips the hilt of his sword, his knuckles turning white.

If he loses control, Alvin wins.

And with his guards cutting off all escape routes, we don't stand a chance.

"What do you say, Stoick?" Alvin mocks my father as his hand carelessly swings forward, tossing my like a ragdoll, until I'm practically gripping onto the edge of the stage for dear life.

Some of my tears from the pain stream down my cheeks and I narrow my eyebrows to look angrier than in pain.

I don't give Dad a chance to answer. With our plan in shambles, and

my back against a wall, I say the only thing that could possibly keep them safe. "It doesn't matter what he says. I'm the Dragon Conqueror, and I'm in charge of this surrender."

Alvin doesn't spare me a glance so I raise my voice. "Do you accept my as an Outcast?"

Some of my fury leaks into my tone, and I raise my chin. I don't care. Let him know I'm angry. Let him see the bloodlust on my face. Let him look me in the eyes and discover the boy he thought he understood is gone and in his place stands a weapon of his own creation.

He turns his head slowly to stare at me, his lips pulling into a snarl, and lets go of my hair to backhand me across the face.

I tumble to the floor and see Dad, sword raised, face ablaze, charge for Alvin.

## 25. Chapter 25

"Dad, no!" I'm screaming, but it's too late.

The guards are all scattering and everyone on my squad has their swords drawn and fighting. Guards swarm onto the stage, coming between Dad and Alvin. Dad drives his shoulder into the first guard who reaches him, sends the man flying off the stage, and whirls to block the sword thrust of another.

Alvin stands above me and laughs.

I slide my hand into the hidden pocket of my belt, find my sheath, and pull my knife free. My bow would be useful, but I plan on taking Alvin head on.

Someone calls my name, and I see Astrid break through a couple Outcast soldiers and rush toward the stage.

"Go back!" I yell and struggle to my feet, my knife ready.

I turn away, praying dad isn't dead. He isn't. He fights like a man possessed — swinging, thrusting, and attacking with terrifying speed and force, disarming and disabling every opponent who comes at him. I had no idea he had this in him, and it's clear I'm not the only one.

Alvin stops laughing and draws his own sword.

Raising my knife, I calculate the angle I'll need to drive the blade through his back and into his heart. Before I can thrust my weapon forward, I'm body slammed from the side and sent sailing off the stage, and into the crowd of guards, and I'm hoping undercover soldiers of my army. They're still milling at the base of the stage, unsure what their role in this unprecedented display of violence should be.

Hands reach for me, steady me, and try to hold me back. I punch, kick, and swing my knife until they back away. I can't save Dad unless I'm on the stage. Anyone standing between me and him is

dead.

I race toward the steps, beating away the few that still reach for me, but before I can mount the stage, a guard jumps in front of me. I drive my knife through his stomach, twist to the right and yank it free while he's still in the act of telling me to halt.

Crimson splashes on my suit. I look away from it and concentrate on reaching Dad. I'm on the stage driving my knife into the back of the guard blocking that exit before he even knows what his him. Not stopping to check if he's dead, I vault over his body and try to see Dad.

He's trapped at the center of the stage. Eight soldiers. Another dozen guard. And in the center of it, Alvin.

I race forward, and Alvin screams for his guards to fall back. Dad is bruised, battered and bleeding, but holds his sword steady. Not that it will help him now. There are too many. He can't take them all.

I can't either.

Just as I'm about to slip into the circle, a distant screaming catches everyone's attention. Everyone turns their heads in the same direction just in time to see Toothless shoot straight at the stage. The old thing explodes in a burst of blue and red and orange. Smoke erupts and the guards fly in all directions. I look up and see the brigade of dragons fly overhead.

Toothless finds me in the smoke and I mount and fly above to try and locate dad. No doubt the explosion saved Dad, but Alvin is nowhere to be found. I bring Toothless in close and he flaps his wings until the smoke is clear.

Dad's the first thing I see, still standing, and when Gobber comes to his aid, I try to find Alvin. I find him just getting up from the explosion. Toothless fires again and apparently Alvin still has enough sense to dodge. I keep firing, but he keeps avoiding them. He dodges and throws a knife, but Toothless easily misses.

I fly Toothless farther out so the whole square is in view. Everyone's outnumbered. Skullette and her Dad are back to back, rotating in circles as five guards circle them. Dad and Gobber still fight near the remains of the stage. A guard thrusts. Dad blocks, but it's clear he's been injured and lacks the strength to keep up the fight for long.

Gobber whirls and swings, flinging drops of blood. His sword goes wide, and Alvin steps into the gap, using Gobber's momentum against him. In seconds, Dad's down and Alvin has his sword against Dad's neck, and his vicious smile twists. The guards behind Gobber grab his arms, fling his sword to the floor, and pin him in place for Alvin.

"You'll pay for giving you son the false hope of even thinking he can defeat me, Stoick." Alvin says, and aims his blade at Dad's throat.

"Wait!" My voice carries across the Square and freezes everyone in place for the split second it takes me to hop off of Toothless and

fall to my knees where Alvin can see me, but no guard can reach me in time.

Alvin laughs, "Come to beg me to save him?"

My smile feels just as vicious as his. "He isn't the one who needs saving."

"Hiccup, no." Dad breathes.

I ignore him.

"What are you going to do? Kill me?" Alvin's voice is full of malice.

"No," I say. Raising my knife, I aim at the soft spot just below my sternum and take a deep breath.

Alvin's sword, still pointed at Dad's throat, wavers. "What are you doing?"

"Taking away the one thing you really want." I say and dig the tip of the knife into my flesh, feeling a flash of pain and then the warmth of blood running down my skin.

Guards surge forward, and I scream, "Stop, or I'll do it!"

Alvin sweeps his hand up, palm out, and the guards stop.

"Hiccup, please," Dad says softly. "Not this."

I don't look away from Alvin. "You want what only I know. If you or anyone else in this city lays a hand on Dad or anyone I love, I'll kill myself and you'll never have my knowledge of dragons!"

His jaw is clenched, pulling his skin tight. "Yesterday I wouldn't have said you had this in you."

"The boy you dealt with yesterday is gone." My voice is cold, my words rising from the terrible grief he carved into me with Mulch's death.

His eyes are fierce pits of hatred as he lowers his sword.

I may not be able to put up a fight with him or the guards, but what I can do is lead them away in time for Dad to get the others safe.

I flick my eyes to the right and see a brown and white Clydesdale. Perfect. I'll only have one shot at this.

Thankfully my clock managed to survive the chaos, and now that I'm on my knees, it covers my hands as I go to my second hidden knife. In a second I fling it toward Alvin like a dagger. As he dodges, I sling my bow off my shoulder and whack two guards in my way and dash for the Clydesdale.

I run up a few barrels and jump until I land on its back and snap the reins. We bolt forward and take off heading in the directions of the gates. Behind me I can hear Alvin yell at his guards to follow me. I slide my sheath to my hip and shoot at any guards standing in our



way.

With that I clear a straight path to the gates. I know I didn't have time to tell Dad my new plan, but I'm hoping he'll catch on. The pain from blow my sternum stings, but I occupy my mind with mind over matter. Lead Alvin away to save the others.

We bolt through the gates which were left wide open, and I shoot a guard trying to stop me. If my arrow didn't kill him, then the horses hooves did. We ride off into the cold gray air, which has now become thick with fog. The galloping of the horse's hooves helps me forget the pounding in my ears.

We've been riding for over ten minutes. As I'm about to slow down, I see the horse's ears twitch left and right, and I know e have pursuers. I turn to look over my right shoulder and see at least five men on horseback not too far behind me.

Knowing that my horse is probably getting tired, I only hope that his drive to escape the horrid that is Outcast Island is as strong as mine. I snap the reins and he increases speed.

After I know we've gained a small amount of distance, I let the reins drop to his neck, and pull an explosive arrow from my sheath and turn my body and aim at the ground. It explodes on impact, knocking out two riders. I feel bad hurting the horses; natural instinct I guess.

I load a regular arrow and aim at the rider farthest to the left. The arrow shifts direction, but still makes a fatal blow to the rider's neck, knocking him off. Once he falls, I actually see his horse ride faster, happy. Free of his abusive rider. He levels up to us and neighs as a thank you.

I smile and an arrow suddenly whizzes by me, just missing my right ear. I turn back as an Outcast soldier loads another arrow, but he's already dead before he gets the chance, as I drive an arrow into his skull.

One left.

But I can't drop my guard. I look behind in the mist and see at least four more. The only thing that keeps me going is the thought that if many Outcasts are out here, then dad must've hopefully gotten everyone else. All I can do is lead them on.

The horse that I freed splits once we reach a fork in the road. Knowing the horse will be a dead giveaway to me, I hastily unlace the saddle and remove the bit. With a skilful toss, it flings at the Outcast like a bolas. It knocks him off and while I know he's still alive, at least it'll knock him out cold long enough for me to take out the other.

I slide the saddle off and rely on my balance to stay on the horse. Thankfully my flying with Toothless has made this easy. I turn my head, to looks at the horse, and he turns to me. I smile and he snorts. And with one leap, I'm rolling in the dir and the galloping becomes distant.

I quickly pull myself to my feet and start sprinting, pulling my hood

over my head. I landed on the outer border of a forest. Regardless of danger, I dive in head first. I don't stop running even though I don't hear the pounding of hooves. A few more minutes and the pain from when I stabbed myself, snakes its way into my ribs until they're feeling like they're on fire.

But I don't stop.

While I know the fact that I jumped is on their minds, I don't imagine them coming after me so soon. To turn the horse around to look where I jumped should buy me enough time. But unfortunately, not even I know where I am. Once I break through some old bushes without leaves, I see I've reached a clearing.

It's wide and open and close to a valley of a canyon. There are several rock ridges where I could stake out a surprise attack, but I need to make sure they see me so that they don't go back for Dad and the others. But how am I supposed to find them when I don't even know where I am?

The Outcasts know this island better than anyone, and I know they won't come back until they've found me for the sake of having to deal with an angry Alvin. And best of all, with my wound, if I act helpless, it'll draw them in like bees to honey.

I wait for a few minutes and pace back and forth to subdue the pain in my ribs, and even try to make myself known by stupidly calling out to Dad. Finally after several minutes, three Outcasts come into view.

"There he is!" one of them screams and they all charge forward.

I pretend to act scared and bolt for the canyon valley. Making sure they notice my slow pace due to my wound. I can hear the hooves coming in close. I scan ahead and make a sharp left. The Outcasts zip past and have to stop and turn before they can follow me again.

As I'm running, I study the sides and streams of the canyon. There's a dead end coming up ahead. I make another turn, my cloak flowing as I run. On my way, two horsemen match my pace so they're on both my sides.

They mockingly laugh, thinking they've got me. But with one quick jab of my hand, I latch onto the Outcast to my left and use his weight to pull myself up and kick him off. I release him as my feet hover over the saddle of the horse so that we don't fall off together.

I shift to one knee and aim an arrow at the second rider. He falls to the ground, in a puddle of mud that soon turns red as blood seeps from his wound. I turn away and hop off the horse as we reach a narrow pathway in the canyon.

There's a pause and silence. There's whistling and the sound of more hooves. I turn in a circle and just as I've made a complete 180, three more riders bolt from a hidden hole in the canyon wall. I start running again.

Okay, even this is too much for me. It's like they're hunting me down. Like a wolf. A predator. Hungry for my flesh. I keep my eyes on the lining of the canyon walls and turn to the left knowing I'll have

reached a dead end.

I can hear them mock me, "Ha-ha! We've got him now!"

"Ha-ha! You betcha!"

Once I hear the hooves behind me, I turn and look defeated. I use my cloak to hide how many arrows I have left. If they see that, they'll know I have a chance to win. But instead of using my bow, I sling it over my shoulder and run up the side of the wall, leaping to a ledge big enough to hold me.

Using my momentum, I thrust myself forward and run as fast as I can before gravity takes effect and pulls me down, just on the other side of the horses that were blocking my only exit. I quickly turn back and shoot an explosive arrow at the ledge and once it explodes, a small avalanche of rocks falls, trapping the Outcasts.

With a slap, the horses ride off after I remove their saddles and bits and reins. I listen closely and don't hear the sound of any more pursuers. I don't know where I could be, but knowing how far I ran, I must be in the middle, if not, close to the other side of the canyon.

Knowing I have time, since the number of Outcasts following me was large enough that Dad and the others were safe, I allow myself to walk for a good few minutes. I watch my breathing so that my sternum doesn't slow me down.

When the pain is durable, I alternate between walking and jogging until I reach the mouth of the canyon. As I climb over a few rocks, I see a nature-drawn border where the rocky, dry land turns to grass once more. I decide to do a steady jog until I reach the border.

But as just clear an outcropping of rocks, a noose, or lasso more precisely, flies out of nowhere and encloses around my neck. I can still breathe, but I'm yanked back. I tumble down a small hill before crashing into the dirt. Puffs of dry soil cloud around me. An Outcast comes out of hiding, laughing, mocking me.

"Thought you could escape us, Hiccup? Ha-ha!"

Fury pulls me to me feet, and I'm about to charge when another lasso closes around my neck and keep me back. There's chatter and more and more men show up. Calling left and right as they locate me.

Another lasso snags my right hand and I'm pulled back again into the dirt. I jump to my feet, not willing to give up too easily. I run for the next Outcast, but a fifth lasso grabs my left back ankle. A sixth, my left wrist.

I feel like an animal. Trapped. At the mercy of hunters. Lassoing me, capturing me. So I might as well act like it.

I kick scream and wail out. Flailing my limbs in an attempt to ward them off. But they all back up, pulling the strings tight. Forcing me to collapse to the ground as they surround me.

"Hold him! Hold him!" an Outcasts screams as I continue to wail. Not as severe as I did with the men in the alley, but fairly close.

As I continue to struggle, there's the faint sound of footsteps. Over on a rock ridge, I hear a pleading cry. I look up and see Toothless. Behind him I see Dad, Skullette, Gobber, Astrid. Everyone.

"Toothless?" I whisper.

Suddenly he digs his claws into the rock and begins to slowly slide down the ridge to reach me.

\_No.\_

"Toothless, no! Stop!" I scream at the top of my lungs. It's so loud and sudden, he stops dead and freezes.

I can't let them take him.

"Toothless, go! Get out of here!" I order.

Toothless stands there immobilized by his fear. He wants to stay, to help me. He can't leave me behind. But he has to.

"NOW!"

Toothless' eyes become glassy. In a way that's out of the ordinary even for a dragon. His eyes furrow, and with a painful, blood-chilling, heart-rending wail of misery, he turns away and climbs back up the rock ridge.

Everyone then turns away and with two steps forward, they're out of sight. Once they're gone, the Outcasts continue to surround me and pull at the ropes.

Panic begins to set in.

I was scared.

I don't know what's going to happen to me, but at least Dad and the others were safe.

And that to me, is a small victory I can carry to my grave.

## 26. Chapter 26

The dungeon is a dank, smelly pit carved out of the foundation of Alvin's compound. Individual cells are simply hollowed out husks within the stone. The walls are slimy with moisture, iron bars block the doorways, and a few half-hearted torches burn along the aisle between cells.

I'm dragged past five cells before the guards reach the one set aside for me. Two of the cells are empty. One holds a gaunt man in filthy clothing huddled on a thin straw pallet. One holds a younger man shackled to the back wall. The cell across from mine holds a young pregnant woman wrapped in a coarse brown blanket. She doesn't look at me.

I wonder which one of them is the spy planted here to gain my

trust.

After pulling me into my cell, the guards fasten heavy iron cuffs around my wrists, and take my bow, the sheath of arrows, the dagger in my left boot, and my knife. While one guard pats me down, looking for additional blades, the other yanks on the heavy rusted chains attached to the cuffs at my wrists, testing them for weakness.

The chains loop through iron circles welded into the back wall of the cell and restrict my ability to go more than halfway toward the doorway. I ignore them in favor of scanning the ceiling for any small holes that I could carve through. I can't find any, but decide the smartest act is to act like I'm being watched at all times.

If I'm going to escape, I can't afford a single misstep.

Satisfied I'm weaponless, the guards take my cloak and toss it just out of reach, leaving me to the mercy of the dungeon's chill. They laugh as they slam my cage door shut and leave.

A few strong pulls assure me my chains aren't coming out of the wall without help. Which means I can't reach my cloak. Which limits my options. Fear for my father and the others is a constant hum in the background of my thoughts, but I can't give into it. The only way I can be useful to them now is to keep a clear head and apply logic to my current circumstances.

I have my boots. My belt buckle. My empty knife sheath. Not enough to stage an escape plan. I need my cloak, but I refuse to reach for it. I refuse to even glance at it. If I'm being watched, the fastest way to ensure I never see my cloak again is to look like I want it.

My cell has a thin, water-stained pallet lying on the stone floor, and a half-rotted wooden bucket shoved into the center closest to me. Neither seems particularly useful for an escape effort, but you never know what might come in handy.

The shackles bite into my wrists as I stand and slowly pace the back wall, counting the measurements and feeling for drafts so I can calculate how close I am to the outside wall of the dungeon.

Heavy footsteps sound at the main entrance, and I look up to see two guards, blazing torches in hand, precede Alvin into the miserable space. I move closer to the bucket, putting enough space between me and the door of my cell that he'll have to come all the way inside if he wants to hurt me.

He doesn't come into my cell, though. He stops in front of the cell containing the pregnant woman huddled in a blanket.

"Warm enough, Rachel?" he asks without a hint of concern in his voice.

She doesn't respond.

I keep my expression neutral as a tight band wraps around my chest. If Alvin's cold enough to keep a helpless, innocent woman prisoner, then he's the man that he says he is and more. One thought lingering in my head is more like a question. If he's keeping her here, she must have some form of value. I shudder at the thought of Alvin using

her as a blackmail or bribe.

I refuse to consider the alternative.

She doesn't look up at Alvin as she pulls her thin blanket closer to her body, but it doesn't matter. He never expected a response. This show was for me alone. His laugh is an ugly thing filling up the space between us as he crosses the aisle and gestures for the guards to open the door to my cell.

I back up until I have several lengths of loose chain at my disposal.

Alvin steps into my cell. The flickering torchlight illuminates his face, throwing the rest of his body into the shadows.

"You thought you could outsmart me, didn't you?" He flexes his right hand into a fist. The light slides along the ecru curve of his horned shoulder plate and highlighting the metal of his horned helmet. I brace myself and gather up a length of chain as quietly as I can, ignoring how bruised and battered I feel from the sword-fight on the gallows stage.

"You were always sure of yourself. So convinced no one could outwit the great Hiccup." His lip curls as he spits my name at me.

Maybe I shouldn't engage him. Maybe I should keep my silence and let him talk, hoping to pick up nuggets of information along the way. Or maybe pushing him to his limits is the best way to peel back the mask and see what I'm truly dealing with.

"How do you know?" I ask. "You've never bothered to have a proper conversation with me."

His fist plows into my gut, slamming me back against the wall. I double over and take the opportunity to gather more lengths of chain while catching my breath.

"I don't have proper conversations with the son of those who defy me." He kicks my feet out from under me. I hit the floor hard, and nearly lose my grip on the chain I'm holding like a rope.

Pushing myself back to my feet, I say, "My father had the right to defy you."

His fist slams into my shoulder, spinning me to the side. I narrowly keep from hitting the wall with my face.

"I wasn't speaking of your father." His breath is a harsh pant against my ear.

I take a deliberate step away from him. He's playing games with me. He knows I have no idea who my mother was, and he's using it against me. Still, part of me wants to ask, just to finally have that gap in my past fully filled in.

The conversation with my father when I was in bed, her cookbook of special recipes sprawled across my legs, wasn't enough.

I don't usually miss my mother. How can I? She died when I was very

young. And whatever memories I do have with her, now that I'm older, they're nothing more than faded memories. And no matter how much I long to remember them, make them solid in my mind, I can't.

And at some moments in the village, like when I see a child running, pulling at their mother's wrist to see the dragons, I miss what we might have had together. I imagine our hair would've been the same shade of brown. Our eyes the same shade of green.

Maybe we would've both loved lemon cake and hated spinach. Or maybe we would've both thought the only truly useful item in any room is something sharp. Pointy things make excellent weapons.

I'll never know, and thinking about it won't help me escape.

"You knew my mother."

He laughs. "You're just like her. Two beings cut from the same cloth."

"And what cloth would that be?"

Alvin's face, bathed in shadow and firelight, is lit with malice. "Unworthy. Disloyal. Without honor."

I straighten and brace my feet. "You wouldn't understand honor if it was branded into your skin."

He lunges for me, but I duck back. Swinging the chains up, I wrap them around his arm. One swift jerk and I fling him onto the filthy floor of the cell. He lands hard, and I drive my knee into his back, but the guards outside the cell are already on me.

They pull me from him, toss me to the ground, and attack. I swing the chains, brutally slashing one guard's face and knocking out another's tooth. One draws his sword, but I duck out of the way. Looping the chains around the sword's hilt as I go, I yank back hard. The sword goes skidding across the cell.

Two more guards arrive, and I'm fighting for my life. Dodging blades, absorbing blows, and doing as much lethal damage as I can with the lengths of the chains in my hands. It's four on one, and I know I can't keep it up much longer. I'm hoping I won't have to.

Alvin rises from the floor and screams at the guards to stop. They back away, bleeding and cursing. I'm bleeding and cursing too, but I hold my head high as he approaches me. I have to make his next actions seem like his idea.

"Go ahead and kill me, if you can." I say, rattling the chains in my hands as if I'm ready to go another round with the guards. "You've given me all the weapon I need."

He spews venom at me. "The second I no longer need you, you're dead." He closes the distance between us, stopping just out of range of the chains. "You may die thinking you've saved everyone, but you, you get to live long enough to know you haven't saved anyone."

Ignoring my anger at the thought of Skullette and my dad attacking the Outcast Island when I specifically told them to flee if I was

caught, I focus on getting the second thing I need. I rattle the chains as if I still have the energy to use them.

Alvin gestures to the closest guard. "Get those things off him and remove them from his cell."

I put up a fight, make it look like I mean it, and it takes three of them to get the shackles off me. The instant I'm free, I back into a corner like I know I've been beaten at my own game.

Alvin laughs and waves at his least-injured guards. "Teach him a lesson. Just make sure you leave him alive."

Two guards advance, fists raised. I parry the first punch and absorb the second as it plows into my shoulder, but see stars as one guard's booted foot slams into my rib cage and sends me sprawling. Pain flares to life within me, and it's all I can do to curl up in a ball and endure as the guards use me as their punching bag.

I've lost track of time when Alvin calls them off. I'm bleeding from my nose and mouth, my body feels like I've been run over by a wagon, and a rib on my right side feels like someone is skewering me with a lit torch every time I breathe.

Alvin strides over to me, grabs a handful of my hair, and wrenches my face around to his. "You've lost your little game. And everyone you love will die because of it." He gestures to a guard, and I hear something sizzle and spit in the flames of the nearest torch.

I know that sound. It's the sound I know better than anything. Being surrounded by weapons, an anvil, fire that breathes to life every time I pump the bellow, nothing sounds more familiar. I begin to panic, and Alvin can feel it. I can't crane my head to look because Alvin holds my hair with a vicious grip.

A guard steps closer, a long thin pole in his hands. At the end of the pole, the metal insignia of the Outcasts, glows red hot. I twist away from Alvin, but he settles his knee on my side, turning my aching rib into a breath-stealing howl of agony, and holds my face steady with both his hands.

"I beat you," Alvin says, "and every time I look at you, I'll know it."

The guard presses the blazing-hot metal into the side of my neck, and I scream. When he said "brand me as an Outcast", I didn't know he meant literally.

The smell of scorched skin fills the air, and I retch as brilliant spots dance in front of my eyes. I drag in a deep breath and try to ride out the worst of the agony, but it refuses to abate. Letting go of me, Alvin rises and says to the dungeon guard, "Water only. Don't bother offering this one any food. We won't need to keep him alive long enough to warrant it."

Leaving me huddled on the floor, burned and bleeding, Alvin and his guards leave, slamming the cell bars closed in their wake. I wait until I hear their footsteps fade. Until the door at the entrance closes. Until I've silently recounted everything I know about every dragon in the book. The Scauldron having venom in its front buck



teeth. The Whispering Death's rotating teeth can burrow through anything.

When I'm certain I've spent enough time looking defeated and broken that anyone watching me wouldn't question my need for warmth, do I slowly crawl across the floor. Every inch is torture. I clench my teeth and tell myself pain is just a state of mind. I can rise above it. My body doesn't agree with my theory, so I force myself to recite the entire book of dragons - cover to cover " to give myself something productive to focus on.

I'm shaking by the time I reach my destination, but furious triumph warms me from the inside as I lay hands on the one thing I wanted all along.

My cloak.

I claw through the fabric with desperate fingers as I try to locate my prize of enduring the pain. I finally manage to find the pocket I've been searching for, near the small button that connects my hood to my cape. I dig through it hoping, praying I don't find it gone. When my fingers close around the Oleander berry, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I had quickly switched one berry from my pocket on my suit to my cloak. Just in case the guards somehow saw the pocket and needed to check. I assume the other one in the pocket of my Dragon Conqueror suit is squished from the beating.

I clutch it in my right hand, just enough so that I can feel the skin of the berry touch my skin, but not enough to squish it, and wind my left hand protectively around my right, and scoot back into the far corner of the cell. Not even caring about the pain from my rib.

I can't afford to lose this. Not now. I'll treat it like its porcelain.

With shaking hands, I open my fingers slowly and stare at the berry in the torchlight.

\_Do it. Do it. Do it!\_ I scream to myself.

One gulp, and this whole thing will be over. No more war. No more pain. No more Alvin. And yet I can't bring myself to tip the heel of my hand to my lips and just let the berry slide onto my tongue. Killing me the minute I swallow.

My heart pounds in my sore joints and slams my head from the inside. My hands get worse and nearly drop the berry, but I catch it and clutch it tight to my chest. Suddenly, I begin to cry.

Not from the pain. I know it's not that.

Am I crying because I'm too weak to do it, or because I'm strong enough not to?

Maybe I just don't want to say goodbye. Not like this.

Maybe it's because it don't want to look defeated. If I'm going to do this, it'll be after I kill Alvin. Then I'll swallow the berry before

the Outcasts can tackle and kill me.

I pull my cloak over my shivering, bloody body, and pull the hood over my head - opening first - so it blocks out everything I see. The cloak naturally drapes around my body, doing its best to shade me from the cold.

Wrapped in darkness, I remember that feeling of protection I feel from Toothless whenever his wings wrap around us both. Securing us. Protecting us. I nestle down deeper, uncomfortable and cold. Even in the darkness of the hood covering the front of my face, I can still see the outline of the berry in my hands.

I'm breathing heavily from my inner conflict on whether or not to swallow. Tears scald my cheeks with warmth. I don't know what to do.

I want to die, but I want to say goodbye.

I want to kill Alvin, but suicide is so much easier.

And faster.

And possible.

Images of everyone walking away from me as the Outcast roped me and pulled me away, flash through my mind, along with the gory images of Hunter dying in my arms. Mulch, icy cold with blood adorning his lips.

I cry some more.

Skullette, weeping in the Dragon Academy with Toothless and Astrid, and everyone else.

I cry some more.

Dad sitting in my room, holding my mother's cookbook along with my green tunic.

Today he might lose his son too.

Gobber, slamming his hammer down on the anvil as he tries to deal with his virtual loss.

I cry some more.

My fingers open once again to reveal the berry, still perfectly preserved. Sobs choke and claw at my throat. Finally, I clutch it tight in my fingers.

Then I drop it to the moisten floor of my cell, and slam the heel of my boot on it, hearing the fruit break under my foot with a distinguishing squish.

And I cry some more.

I no longer know what time it is. I've been lying on the damp, gritty floor of this cell for hours. Maybe a day. Maybe more. Without a way to track the sun, I can't be sure.

Pain is a constant companion â€" stabbing me with every breath and making a mockery of my attempts at sleep. At least one rib is broken, my arms and legs ache fiercely with bone-deep bruises, and my eyes are nearly swollen shut.

But worse than all of that is the burn on my neck. Every throb of agony from my seared flesh is a reminder of Alvin's power over me. I want to use that pain to focus a plan to remove that power from him permanently, but my thoughts are fuzzy and vague, and the pain seems so much more important.

A chill seeps into me from the stone floor I lay on, and even with my cloak, I'm shivering. I should force myself to stand up and walk. Loosen the muscles. Promote faster healing. I inhale slowly, trying to keep from pressing my lungs against my rib cage with too much force, and place my palms flat on the floor in front of me.

My body shakes as I slowly push myself to my hands and knees, inch by torturous inch. Gray dots swirl in front of my limited vision, and my empty stomach rebels against the waves of dizziness swamping me.

I may have gained my cloak, but I'm in no condition to gain my freedom.

It's a devastating thought, but I can't hang onto it for long. Heat is eating away at my brain, blurring the edges of reality until I can't tell if the contents of my head are memories, dreams, or wisps of things not worth the effort the effort it takes to force them into something that makes sense.

I can't stand without help. I wish Toothless was here. But of course, he can't be, and I'm glad. Crawling toward the wall is a slow, agonizing process, and I stop frequently to rest, laying my face against the filthy stone floor and shivering both from external cold and the internal heat that blazes through my head but refuses to warm my body.

How does one cure a fever? I can't remember. My body shakes as I force myself to keep crawling. Keep moving. Keep pushing my muscles to work through the bruises because \_he'll \_come back. And I refuse to let him kill me.

I reach the wall sometime later and discover my nose is bleeding. I don't know how long that's been going on, and I decide I don't care.

From a distance, I hear the main dungeon door open, and I know I should be afraid, but that takes too much effort. Instead, I dig my fingers into the rugged texture of the wall beside me, and pull myself to my feet.

The room spins in slow, sickening circles. I try to breathe through the nausea this creates, but dragging air into my lungs ignites the terrible pain in my side. Someone is walking along the row between cells. I don't know who it is. I can't seem to turn my head to look. Instead, I lean my forehead against the cold stone of the wall and

shake uncontrollably.

Skullette is out there. Somewhere. With Dad. Astrid. Toothless. I know I should remember something important about their situation, but with fire eating at my brain, all I can think about is Toothless. His plasma blasts shooting through the air. Exploding in the sky, like a firework. Flames adorning the edges. Like the flames pounding at the inside of my skull.

I bang my head against the wall to put out the flames, but they just multiply.

Move.

I have to move.

If I don't, he'll kill me before I can escape.

I slide one foot in front of me, but it wobbles, and I have to hand on to the wall to keep from falling over.

Someone opens the door to my cell. The noise explodes inside my head, sending brutal hammers of pain into my temples. I let go of the wall to cover my ears, and pitch forward onto the unforgiving stone floor. Footsteps hurry my way, and I reach for my bow. It isn't there, and the motion triggers the pain in my side until I'm gaping air in quick, shallow breaths.

The owner of the footsteps reaches me, and crouches down. I can't see who it is, but the soft scent of dandelion seeps through the stench of the cell and makes me want to close my eyes and pretend I'm in a field. Safe. Free. Lying on a bed of crushed dandelion while the pain in my body subsides into nothing but a memory, and those I love are still alive and well.

"Oh," a girl's voice exclaims in a whisper. A cool hand presses against my forehead.

For a moment, I imagine I'm back in bed, sick with the flu and my mother's checking my temperature.

I'm dreaming. I must be. There aren't any girls walking freely through the dungeon. My brain has cooked up a fantasy, and if I don't snap out of it, whoever is truly inside my cell with me will kill me before I can keep my promise to Dad. And Skullette.

\_Skullette\_.

Skullette doesn't smell like dandelion. She smells like Lavender. And Astrid smells of citrus and midnight jasmine. I with the dandelion would disappear and become Skullette's scent instead.

It doesn't.

Instead, the same cool hands that were pressed to my forehead are busy pushing something into the pocket of my cloak.

"Food," she whispers against my ear. "I'm putting medicine for your fever in the water. When the fever goes down, eat."

A cup tips against my lips and a trickle of bitter-tasting water dribbles down into my mouth. I swallow reflexively, though part of me is screaming that this is a trick. A trap. Another wicked ploy of Alvin to torture me. maybe it's poison. Maybe it's something that will scrape me raw inside, doubling the pain until I want to kill myself just to make it end.

I turn my face and let another mouthful of water leak out onto the floor.

A girl lays her face next to mine, her outline blurry through the swollen slits of my eyelids. "Swallow," she says softly. "We're trying to help you."

I want to ask her who she means. No one helps you once you're in the dungeon. No one from Outcast Island has ever helped me outside the dungeon either. The hard, brisk steps of a guard echo down the row, coming swiftly toward my cell.

"Hurry!" she whispers and presses the cup to my lips.

The water feels good, even if it tastes vile, and I swallow. It might be a trick. It might make things worse, but the heat beating at my brain won't allow me the luxury of thinking through my options, and I'm desperately thirsty.

"What are you doing, girl?" the guard demands.

"Watering the prisoner as you asked." She says, her tone low and respectful.

"He has enough. Get out of there."

She stands immediately and exits the cell, her steps hurried. The guard laughs as he looks at me lying on the floor, shivering while blood slowly seeps out of my nose. I close my eyes and wish for a world where Skullette and Dad are safe and Mulch still alive.

It's morning the next day. At least I think it is. I still don't know. And I make a shocking discovery.

I'm awake.

She didn't kill me. Whatever the dandelion-scented girl put in my water, is soothed my feverish thinking and kept the pain somewhat at bay. I'm able to wrap myself in my cloak, lean against the wall, and sleep until the next guard makes his rounds.

By the time he reaches my cell, I've slumped to the floor and I huddle there, shivering. He studies me for a moment. I study him from under the lining of the hood of my cloak. He's about seventeen if I had to guess. Dark brown hair, blue eyes. Lean-muscled body, well-built.

He grunts at me and traces along his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. Like he's a wolf, and I'm a baby lamb caught in his sights. The corners of his mouth curling into a smirk. His eyes fill with . . . lust. And I shudder at the thoughts of what he could possibly be thinking. What's even worse is that, if my assumptions are right,

whatever he's thinking, it's a high possibility he could do it.

He then makes the trek back to the main door, locks it behind him, and leaves the dungeon in silence again. I wait a few minutes longer to make sure he's truly gone, and then slowly sit up, making it look like it's a struggle to do so. That isn't hard either. My muscles protest the slightest movement, the scorched skin on the side of my neck throbs, and my broken rib aches fiercely.

But my fever is gone, and I can think clearly again.

Along with the return of reason comes the knowledge that I've wasted precious time succumbing to my injuries. I don't know what day it is, or how long I've been away from Dad and Skullette. My body is weak from lack of food and lack of movement. And Alvin is probably due to arrive at any moment to either toy with me, or drag me out to help him train dragons.

I can't fix it all at once. I have to prioritize and determine an appropriate course of action. Whatever I choose, it has to be something I can do without raising suspicion if I'm being watched by more than just the occasional guard.

Food is the first order of business. I double over as if in excruciating pain and feel within my cloak pockets until I find the wrapped lump the girl left for me. Inside the cloth is a chunk of oat bread with cheese and dried apples inside. I take small bites, rocking back and forth to simulate pain so I can hide what I'm doing. My stomach has been without food for hours, maybe days. I need to take it easy.

One third of the way through the food, I stop eating. It's enough to get my system working again, and I need to conserve what I have left. I don't know when I'll be getting more. I settles against the wall again as exhaustion overtakes me. I'd hoped to get up and walk a bit, but my head is already spinning and I can't risk another fall.

Instead, I slowly stretch each limb and tighten my muscles for the length of time it takes to recite the Book of Dragons. By the time I'm done, I'm shaking and slightly nauseous. Water would be nice, but that's one problem I'm helpless to address.

Through it all, the knowledge that Mulch is gone aches within me, a constant source of pain I rub against with every thought. For just a moment, the image of my mother's smile, the feel of Mulch's arm around my shoulders, and the warmth of Skullette's trust in me bleed together into one gaping pit of loss.

I'm hollowed out.

Empty of everything that once gave me a reason to live.

Grief is a deep pool of darkness, and I huddle on the damp, cold floor as it sucks me under. I had something worth losing, and now that it's gone, now that they're gone, I'm realizing the life of solitude I always thought I wanted isn't good enough anymore.

I don't want to be alone.

I don't want the cold comfort of the pages of the Book of Dragons to keep me company.

I want m family.

I want \_Skullette\_.

Not because she's beautiful. Not because she's my responsibility. I want her because she makes me laugh. Makes me think. Inspires me to be the kind of man I always hoped I'd be.

I want Skullette because the thought of a life without her is more than I can bear.

The grief recedes. It won't help me plan. I haven't lost Skullette. Not yet. I lean my head against the wall, careful not to rub my burned skin against the damp stone, and I turn to see Rachel, staring at me.

I don't greet her. I don't need to announce to anyone that I'm capable of that. But I hold her gaze, trying to assess what I see there. The options are endless.

Either she's an innocent caught up in all of this and means me no harm, or she means me no harm but will unwittingly gather information she'll later deliver to Alvin under duress. Or she's cunning enough to realize she might leverage her way out of here by providing Alvin with secrets about me. Or she's his spy dressed up to look helpless and pregnant. Hoping I'll pity her. Hoping to play on the sense of honor Alvin swears I don't have.

The answer to every scenario is the same. Give nothing away and set in motion my plan for escape before anyone realizes I'm well enough to do so. She's still watching me, but I close my eyes and turn away. It's easy to look exhausted and sick. I don't even have to feign it. Let her report my weaknesses. The fact that I can't even stand. Let her tell them that Alvin has me beaten.

By the time he realizes it, I'll be gone.

"Stop him." someone whispers, a mere breath of sound I barely catch.

I open my eyes a fraction and she's still watching me, her eyes pleading. Stop whom? Alvin? This is exactly the kind of conversation I need to avoid. I close my eyes again, and keep my silence.

"Please."

Another breathy whisper. I tamp down on the surge of irritation that wants to snap my eyes open so I can glare at her into silence. Does she think I'm so easily led that I'll fall for this? Does she really think I have the power at the moment to stop anyone?

"He's a killer. He is . . ." Her whisper chokes off into stillness as the dungeon door opens with a clang.

If "he" is a killer, she can only be discussing Alvin. But how she thinks I'll ever be able to kill him in time while I'm lying

indisposed in a dungeon of stone is a mystery. Not that I don't have a plan for it, of course. But she has no way of knowing that, and her misplaced faith in me rings false.

Another sign I need to be careful what I allow her to see.

The footsteps traveling the aisle are light. They stop at the first occupied cell and a door slides open with a high-pitched squeal. A girl's voice, light and calm, murmurs through the air, and my stomach tightens.

This must be my secret savior. The one who gave me hope that someone on the outside is interested is interested in helping me. I need more information, but I have to hide the transaction from Rachel.

I slide down to the floor and curl into a ball with my back facing the cell door. The girl is talking to every prisoner she encounters. Seeing her talk to me will raise no alarms, while seeing me question her will give more away than I can afford.

She moves to the cell with the young man in chains, and her voice is clearer now. I listen to her offer him food and water and then quietly suggest he put the paste she's placed in his tin of food on his abraded wrists rather than in his mouth.

She could be arrested for that alone.

I marvel at her courage, even while I tense for the appearance of a guard. No one comes, though, and she moves on to Rachel. I strain to hear their conversation and catch snippets of admonitions to eat everything in front of her and drink her water slowly. Then there's the sound of fabric hitting the floor.

"You can't give me your cloak," Rachel whispers.

Because apparently she is incapable of realizing the best way to punish a good deed is to announce it to everyone else. Or because she thinks turning in the girl will somehow grant her favor with Alvin.

Her mistake could simply be one of youth and ignorance, but I have precious little sympathy for either at the moment. The door to my cell creaks open, and I'm swamped with the delicate scent of dandelion a second before she drops to the floor beside me, clutching a tin water pail and a cup.

The concern on her face doesn't falter, even as she takes in my steady, fever-free gaze. She's tall, thin in a lithe, graceful way, and the torchlight flickers beautifully against her dusky skin. The cloud of dark hair hanging down her back throws off the dandelion scent every time she moves.

She seems familiar, and I try to recall where I've seen her before. One of the stalls in the Lower Market? A merchant's place in the North Hub? Neither of those locations fit.

She scoops a cup of water out of the pail and leans toward me.

"Day?" I mouth silently before accepting a few swallows. The water is



tepid and tastes of tin. It's the most refreshing drink I've ever had.

She frowns as if I've spilled the water out of my mouth and fishes around in her skirt pocket for a scrap of cloth. Bending down, she pretends to mop my face with the cloth and keeps her face level with mine, her hair obscuring her features from anyone outside my cell.

"Tuesday," she says and presses a small, paper-wrapped packet into my hand. "For the pain."

Tuesday. The battle was Saturday. I've lost three days.

She sits up and scoops more water into her cup. I drink obediently, and watch her calm, competent movements. I've seen those movements before, but my brain refuses to make the connection, and I let it go. I have more important things to think about. She's risked death today, not just for me, but for each of the prisoners here. I can't quite understand it.

"Why help?" I mouth to her, though I feel the answer may be too lengthy to share like this.

She dips her cloth in the remaining water and scrubs gently at my face, using her hair once more as a cloak to mask her face from any observers.

"Things must change," she says so softly, I barely catch it. "Someone needs to lead that change. We know it will be you."

I'm stunned into silence, and wait a beat too long to ask her the other questions that burn within me. She's already leaving, shutting the door behind her as if she hasn't just ignited a firestorm of speculation within me.

I'd laugh if it didn't hurt my ribcage. I'm injured, locked in a dungeon, and the only people I still care about are far away from Outcast Island. While I am the Dragon Conquer back on Berk, what part of that description makes me fit to lead a revolution here?

Not that I'm not sympathetic to their cause. The citizens of Outcast Island desperately need change. I'd been wrong to think my mother's death meant the price of dissent was too high to pay. Silent acquiescence in the face of tyranny is no better than outright agreement.

My mother knew that. Now, so do I.

But revolution and change must wait their turn.

Skullette needs me.

Dad needs me.

Alvin needs to be brought to justice.

If I have to lead a revolution to accomplish that, so be it.

## 28. Chapter 28

I think it's Saturday now, which means I've been a guest in Alvin's dungeon for a week. The girl with the dandelion scent hasn't been back since she slipped me a paper-wrapped package of medicinal powder on Tuesday. Instead, a plump stoop-shouldered woman old enough to be my grandmother has cared for the prisoners in silence.

I decide it's a good thing I haven't seen the girl again. Thinking about revolution might distract me from pressing issues already on my plate. The most important of those is escape, but I'm not sure I'm well enough to outrun any pursuing guards as I sprint toward the gates. I estimate another two to three days before my broken rib will allow me to run without doubling over in pain.

Less if I can find a cloth to bind my chest.

I suppose I could use the shirt off my back, until I realize I'm wearing my Dragon Conqueror uniform. That's out of the question. Especially when Rachel in the cell across the aisle watches me every second of the day like a desperate baby bird hoping for a worm.

Alvin hasn't visited again, and the anticipation stretches my nerves until I want something to happen just to get it over with. I'd think he'd relish the opportunity to taunt me. Hurt me. Make sure I know he's won. I decide to take his absence as a sign that he plans on putting me in the arena soon to train his dragons.

So I focus on readying my body for escape. Still, waiting for the inevitable festers in the back of my mind like an infection. I could use the arena to my advantage. But I assume Alvin will be suspecting that. I've spent the last few days sitting or lying on the dungeon floor, doing my best to look hopelessly injured while I tighten and hold my muscles until they shake from exertion.

I've also done my best to honor the grief I feel for Mulch with a solid plan of action I think would make him proud.

But mostly, I've spent my time thinking of Skullette. The way her laugh makes me want to join her before I even know why she's laughing. The light in her eyes when she stares me down and challenges my opinions. The curve of her hip as she walks out of my house and into the Plaza.

I used to feel awkward and uncomfortable with the single-minded intensity she aims at anything in front her, and distancing myself from her gave me peace. Now, the distance between us opens a hollow space inside that can only be filled by her. I don't know how to explain it, and I don't even bother trying.

It's enough to know I need her like I've never needed anyone else.

I promise myself it won't be much longer before I'm ready to break out of this hellhole and get back to her.

My food ran out this morning, but I'm not worried. I won't be locked in this cell much longer. Still, when the dungeon door creaks open, I hope it's the girl because more food means more strength.

But instead of the girl's light footsteps, or the dogged shuffling of the older woman, I hear crisp, purposeful boot steps striding toward my cell.

Alvin.

The next confrontation is upon me, and I need two things from it â€" information and a reprieve from further injury. I flip around to put my injured rib against the wall, out of reach of Alvin's boot, and begin planning as he orders a guard to open my cell door.

He enters my cell, his beard catching and releasing the flickering torchlight like some macabre game of cat and mouse. I pretend I can barely lift my head to see him. I've been pretending this sort of weakness since I woke up cured of my fever. So if he's had me watched, this won't raise alarms.

He laughs, a vulgar, ugly sound full of arrogance. "Look at you." In three long steps, he's at my side. "What a pathetic excuse for a man."

I let my head roll to the side a bit and peer up at him.

"I leave you alone in this dungeon for a week. The great Dragon Conqueror Hiccup. The man who always has a plan." His boot lashes out, connects with my shoulder, and sends me sprawling onto the cell floor.

It hurts, but not as much as I pretend it does. He needs to feel I'm already beaten, or he'll never give me what I need.

"And here you sit. Still locked up. Still unable to make good on your promises." His smile is vicious as he plants his boot on the throbbing burned skin of my neck and leans down.

I don't have to fake the pain this time. Waves of agony roll along my jaw and send dazzling lights exploding through my brain.

"You haven't beaten them," I say, pushing the words teeth clenched tight against the raw, unending anguish eating at me.

He leans closer, grinding his boot into my neck. "What did you say you worthless cur?"

"My father. You haven't beaten them." I draw in a shaky breath, tasting the leather and steel of his boot on the dungeon's fetid air. "He's stronger than you think."

"He's a man who's lost his beloved wife, and soon his precious son."

His voice oozes his special brand of pride â€" two parts power, one part blind ego.

Perfect.

"He can take your guards. Savage. You. He's smarter than you give him credit for."

He snorts, but I can almost hear the doubt slipping in.

"You won't know if you're right until it's too late to make adjustments." I say.

"You'd like me to think that. But when he comes to rescue you, boy, you can bet your life he'll be alone." He laughs again. "And you are betting your life, aren't you? Because the second I have what I want from you, you're dead."

He isn't going to tell me what I need to know. Unfortunately, he's too smart for that. I either need to find another source of information, or wing it once I get out of here.

He stands, his boot sliding across my burned skin like a dozen razors. I breathe heavily, trying to control the waves of pain racking me, and see Rachel staring at me with horror on her face.

Which is interesting.

She doesn't want to hurt me. Because she can't stand to see another suffer?

If I can't get Alvin to give me what I want, maybe I can force him to convince Rachel to do so instead.

I curl up on the floor in case he decides to kick any of my vital organs. "I'll happily bet my life that Skullette will kill Savage when he attacks her."

"She's a girl." Alvin's voice dismissive as he walks toward my cell door.

Time to play the big card. The one I hope will scare Rachel into spilling her guts.

"Every other girl in her village was raised with dolls and tea sets and proper etiquette. Skullette was sword sighting, clubbing out practice dummy, and learning how to eviscerate a man at close range with her knife."

Rachel worries her blanket with nervous fingers.

"Savage won't even know what hit him. You've sent the man to his death."

Alvin shakes his head and walks out of my cell. "Do you really think I care which one of them comes back alive as long as I get what I want?"

The cell door slams shut. "Next time I see you, boy, my guards will escort you to the arena and we can get started on training my dragons. After that, your execution." He leaves, taking his guards with him, and the silence in his wake is punctured by sharp, gut-wrenching sobs from Rachel.

I wait, willing her to look at me, and finally get my wish. My voice is a thin whisper of sound as I say, "I can stop her. I can get to them in time."

She frowns but inches closer to the bars on her door. "How? I thought you could get out somehow. The girl said you could. But you haven't. You just lie there." Her voice is a faint breath of sound nearly lost beneath the sizzle of the torches lining the corridor.

I have to hope the snapping flames and heavy stone walls are enough to keep the other prisoners from overhearing us.

I sit up and face her, careful not to look like I can move with ease. "Of course I haven't made it look like I'm anything but badly injured. You think they need that information?"

She chews on her lower lip.

"I'm telling the truth about Skullette. She's a fierce warrior. And she left here already angry and hoping for blood. Savage and his other soldiers will never make it."

"She's something." She says. "But you need to leave to aid your father."

"I will. But I need one more piece of information first. A piece I hope you have for me."

"What is it?"

There's no resistance in her tone. She believes me. Believing I can save my own girlfriend from becoming a killer, or worse getting killed herself. I dislike the sudden weight of responsibility I feel in the face of her trust.

"I just need to know if there have been any discussions of my father surrendering to Alvin."

"None that I've heard. But I did over hear the guards discussing about a possible invasion that might happen for them to rescue you."

I'm flooded with relief. Knowing my father won't surrender eases me, but the thought of them continuing with the original plan "to blow up the Outcast capital city and drive Alvin out - only encourages me to escape soon so they can have my help.

"The battle's not going to be pretty. But I promise you, I'll come back."

"Why would you ever come back here?" she asks.

"Because I'm not leaving you here. Any of you." The words roll easily off my tongue, and I wonder how long they've been breeding in the back of my mind.

Probably from the moment I saw the life leave Mulch's eyes at the whim of Alvin. I can't stomach the thought of one more innocent victim crushed beneath the bloody boot of the Outcasts.

"It's time for change, and I'm going to deliver it."

She's silent for a moment, her hands tearing at the blanket, and then says, "Please, take him down."

"I will. I promise."

With that, she shifts on her blanket, reading herself for bed. Before she closes her eyes, after she drapes the blanket over her womb, I ask her the question I never thought I'd ask an Outcast prisoner.

"What is it?" I ask.

She looks to me in confusion. Then I wait until the snores tell me the other prisoners are all asleep before rephrasing my question.

"The gender of the baby?"

"We don't know. But we're hoping for a girl." She says so innocently that whatever defenses I had toward her before, melt away like the torches.

As she settles down as best as she can, I pull my cloak over my body. And out of the corner of my eye, I see her womb flinch a little. I turn my head to see, and it happens again. Rachel rubs her womb as if to calm the child within. As if it can feel her touch from within.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"It's fine. Just has the hiccups." She says with a smile. Then she rests her head against the stone wall.

The next morning, I wake up to find the torches completely burned out. Leaving the dungeon a dark gaping hole. I take the opportunity and struggle to my feet for the first time in a week. I pace my cell, willing the blood to flow into my legs fast enough for me to leave before a guard decides to investigate my conversation with Rachel last night. The dungeon is full of heavy sounds of dripping water and heavy sleep.

My legs still tingle, but they'll hold me if I need to run. Approaching the far right corner of my cell, the one with the draft seeping in through the cracks, I run my fingers along the damp, craggy stone, judging distances and looking for a weakness I'm not convinced is there.

Today's the day I'll get to be out in the open. Out of this stuffy place and into an arena full of fresh air. While I'm still trapped, it'll be a better improvement. When I hear the latch of the door unlock. I slide down the wall, my back against it and in walks the seventeen year old guard who licked his lips at me before.

I shudder at the memory.

He walks down the aisle, annoyingly knocking the hilt of his sword against the iron bars, having it echo around the room. My eyes squint at the noise, while other prisoners jump and yelp at the rude awakening. He stops two cells down from mine. He lowers his sword and just looks at me.

"You're coming with me today, boy." He says in a raspy tone. I pray

to Thor he means he's taking me to Alvin.

He opens my cell door and I pretend to struggle to my feet. I grip the wall for support, but when I feel him grab my arm and yank me out, I stumble into Rachel's cell door. She flinches back with a start. Luckily I was able to grab my cloak.

I push myself off the bars and hold my middle to dull the pain from my ribs. I wrap my cloak around my body securing the buttons. I hold myself as I walk past the guard and when I do, he shoves me through the arched doorway. He follows and slams the main cell door behind him.

We walk through the stone corridor and suddenly I want to be back in my cell. I can see the daylight leaking through the crack in the walls, desperately trying to give the dull place life. Two guards are posted at the door eyeball me up and down. When they see the guard behind me, the one on the left reaches and opens the door.

I lift my chin as I stand as straight as I can. The door slowly creaks open with an irritating squeal. For fifteen seconds, my eyes are dazzled by the bright sunlight and I'm conscious of only a strong wind with the hopeful smell of pine trees.

It takes my eyes to adjust to realize my hood is up. I push it back, revealing my pale skin to the sunlight. I drop my head back and let it scorch my skin. Feeling so good to remember the pain of sunburn. The wind casting my hair. Reminds me of flying with Toothless.

But my embracement was short lived when the guard pushes me forward and orders me to go right. We walk across a causeway that leads to a small turret looking out at the ocean. Behind it, small area that closely resembles the Plaza back on Berk. Small shops and houses intermixed on either side, leaving a wide open aisle with a big cobblestone circle at the epicenter.

We head down the stone steps toward the plaza. Several Outcast citizens eye me, suspiciously and I have to resist the impulse to pull my hood over my head. The only thing keeping me is the bright light and soothing breeze.

As we keep walking, I remain silent as I peer back and forth at the village. I can see we're nearing the arena when the chain covering is in sight. I have no idea what Alvin plans on doing with me. Either he really thinks I can train his dragons, or he's not even going to try and just wants to see me die.

I already know that they have the same dragons as we do, but god knows what they're capable of. I mean, they were practically raised on Outcast Island.

We're nearing the towering chain dome when I see Alvin standing adjacent to where I'm standing. He looks in my direction and smiles that eerie smile. The smile that makes you think he has something planned.

I'm escorted down below a ramp like at the Dragon Academy. The rusted gates are turned open. We take three steps into the arena before he brutally pushes me hard enough that I'm propelled forward.

I stumble over the edge of my cloak and crumple to the floor, into the middle of the arena. Twisting my body in midair so I land with my back to him.

I lift my head and I'm facing a dark hole that looks like the entrance to a cage. I push myself up, rubbing my middle to ease the pain of my rib from when I fell. When I drop my arm, my cloak conceals my entire body.

I look up and see Alvin still smiling. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head to get the image out of my head. Then I turn to face the hole again. The creaking of gates strains my ears. It slowly rises.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, as the gate slowly comes to a rusted stop.

## 29. Chapter 29

A Monstrous Nightmare bursts through the door in an explosion so sudden I'm thrown back before I even realize it's a Monstrous Nightmare.

I hit the stone wall and fall to the ground wheezing as the dragon roars and darts to the left, circling the arena, breathing fire everywhere. I push myself to my feet as the dragon has reached the top of the chain dome.

It dips its head down to me. Its eyes squint as it tries to see my predicament. I shift my weight, widen my stance, and crouch. The Nightmare drops down in front of me, sways its long body left and right, ready for any angle I might attack from.

The Nightmare is a brilliant shade of royal blue, several black scales sprinkled all across its back and at the tip of its tail. Its wings are wide, the skin between the talons a lighter shade, making it almost milky. His eyes still the same yellow color as Hookfang.

My chest rises and falls in quick breaths as we size each other up. I virtually might not have any real weapons, but my knowledge is all I need to get me to win, run, and escape the island. I could use a ride, and as long as he hates the Outcasts as much as I do, hopefully we can both make it out of here without throwing a punch or bite.

But getting my bow and other weapons is another task. I need to find the armory, since that's the one place it's most likely to be. Either that or somewhere in Alvin's place. So he can bask at it thinking he has me at his mercy. I need to find it, and the only way is by air.

I raise my hand and slowly walk toward the dragon. Tiptoeing like Skullette showed me when approaching prey. The Nightmare hisses and automatically my hands fumble to the notch on my cloak. I unbutton it with one snap of my middle finger and thumb, my cloak puddles around my feet.

With my Dragon Conqueror uniform exposed, the dragon raises his head in bewilderment. But his guard is still high. People are gathering



around at the site of me in my uniform. They call their kids, their brothers, their neighbors, all calling and yelling that Alvin has the Dragon Conqueror captured.

The Nightmare stays put as I inch closer. He doesn't seem threatened by me, but something still keeps him hesitant. He snarls at my hand, but doesn't step back. As I'm nearing closer, I realize, I don't even know what Alvin wants me to do.

I lower my hand and step back a few feet before asking, "What exactly am I doing?"

"Training dragons obviously." Is all he says to me before taking a seat in a stone throne. His voice had an impatient tone to it. As if I've just asked him a question that was so obvious.

I sigh as I look back at the Monstrous Nightmare. His eyes are normal, body still swaying back and forth, but he's not snarling. I take a deep breath before I approach him slowly. He shifts his claws so he can push himself higher, towering over me like a dark shadow.

"It's okay." I say. My voice calm for the dragon. "I'm a friend."

He snorts out a small puff of flames. They dissipate before they can singe off my hair.

Intimidation.

I don't flinch or block my face, I stare at him head on. Showing him he has to do better than that if he wants to scare me.

"Come on, boy!" Alvin shouts, scaring both of us. The Nightmare and I both look in unison as Alvin's fist pounds the arm of his throne. "I'm growing impatient!"

The Monstrous Nightmare roars in irritation at him. Clearly he has a grudge against him. There's my chance. "You too, huh?" I ask.

The Nightmare turns and cocks his head in confusion. "I hate him too. He captured me and forced me in here, against my will." I say. The Nightmare lowers his head his defenses melting. "He took me from my family. He took my freedom. Now there's nothing in this world that I want more, than to be free."

He lifts his head, I extend my hand. He inches closer, and my hand touches his nose. A gentle hand on his snout. Then I remember something that Snotlout did. I thrust myself forward, grab both horns of the dragon and bend them to the ground.

The Monstrous Nightmare purrs and his tongue flaps out in pleasure. I chuckle and let the dragon up. After he shakes out, I climb up on his neck and grab the horns. "Let's escape together." I say. And then the Nightmare fires at the chain dome.

The entire thing shakes with the force of the explosion and smoke bellows out into the sky. I don't give the debris time to stop falling. I can't. The doors are already creaking open, and a guard shouting an alarm.

Snatching my cloak, keeping the hood over my head to protect myself from the worst of it, I pull the Nightmare's horns up and his head follows, facing the gaping hole of the chain dome. The circular opening is nothing more than an opening big enough for both of us.

Crumbled bits of stone and dust cloud the arena. Citizens scream and run for the hills, screaming that the Dragon Conqueror is on the loose. Up above, the sky beckons. We fly forward, scramble over guards and soldiers, and dive through the hole as someone pulls out their sword. We fly high enough to get a bird's-eye view of the entire village.

From the main compound, an alarm bell peals, disturbing the day with insistent clamor. I scan my surroundings, take in the distance between me and the armory " which I can spot with the help of a sloppily painted sword on the front double doors " and start flying.

I'm still ten yards from the ground when someone shouts below me. I don't bother looking. It would just slow me down. Instead, I reach inside my inner cloak pocket and pull out a dagger I was able to keep hidden. From the guards. The never thought to look in a cloak for weapons. Their mistake.

I can hear Alvin shout orders to the guards to shoot me down. I know they don't care whether they hit me or the dragon. Either shot will bring me down. More shouts echo across the yard, and I catch guards with spears running along the causeway, primed to intersect me if it takes me longer than twenty seconds to fly to the armory.

I lunge forward, driving the dragon down and snatching a spear from on guard while the Nightmare's tale wipes them both away like pesky flies. I scan around and see a turret from the outer wall a few hundred yards from the armory. I squint to get a better look and see one of them possessing a bow. It'll have to do until I can find my own.

I thrust the spear forward and it shoots the man right in the heart, the dragon swoops down and in a millisecond makes a sharp left turn away from the turret. Thankfully I got the bow, but with only on arrow ready.

Good enough.

We fly to the armory and I pull back the string. The Monstrous Nightmare puffs its breathe out, and small flames jet through its nostrils, scorching the earth beneath and in front of it. The one guard gets incinerated completely. The other falls to my arrow. We reach the ground, the entire armory slowly being eaten by the flames as they start from the bottom. Slithering their way to the buttresses.

I need to find my bow and sheath and get out before the entire thing collapses. I leap off the Nightmare and turn back, "Can you handle it?" I ask through the flames. He roars and ignites his entire body.

He takes the oncoming guards as I frantically search through the weapons looking for mine. I need to find it quick, I don't want him

facing the soldiers alone, even if he can keep it up.

Chuckling the bow I stole from the guard on the turret, it slices through the air like a javelin and sinks in the neck of one guard who was about to attack the Nightmare from behind.

My eyes scan through the weapons on the wall, none matching my bow. I shift through the flames, constantly burning my hands when I reach anything metal. Which is everything.

I yelp in pain and grip my hand as I feel the heat scorch beneath my skin.

It's not here.

My hands are covered in red welts as I pry open a big wooden crate. Getting at least three splinters in my fingers. I rummage through crossbows, arrows, knives, but none are mine. But that doesn't mean I should waste them.

I hear the Monstrous Nightmare wail behind me and one Outcast has sunk his knife into the dragon's lower portion of his neck. Not too deep, but blood is already running down from the wound.

"Come on, come on!" I whisper to myself. Panic germinating within me.

My eyes dart back and forth until they home in on a golden bow just in arm's reach and I yank it free. I pull an arrow from the sheath that's still wedged in the crate and arm as I turn. I sink an arrow into the Outcast's calf as he plunges into the flames.

The dragon ignites himself again so no Outcast will try to come too close. He seems fine and I go back to rummaging through the crates. I yank another one open, and there's maces, swords, axes, hatchets, and medieval flails.

The flames continue to eat away the remains of the armory, and my nose and throat are burning. The coughing soon begins after and my lungs feel like I've just swallowed pounds of hot coal. The heat is horrible, but even worse than the heat is the smoke which is filling the armory even with the ceiling blown off. It threatens to suffocate me any minute.

Discomfort turns to distress as each breath sends a searing pain through my joints. I try to clear my throat, but it only burns, and my tonsils feel swollen. Finally my sheath is smashed between an axe and a handful of knives.

"Yes!" I say in a raspy throat.

All of the arrows are untouched, left as they were when they were taken from me in the dungeon. But I need my bow. My hands are blistering but I force myself to open another crate. Nothing.

The flames burn and destroy. I decide it's officially not here. But before I leave, I sling an extra bow and a second sheath of arrows over my body and slide two long knives and a small dagger into my belt to replace the ones I lost.

Smoke billows up, choking me, and flames crawl steadily inward. They've already devoured the walls. One simple blow from the wind, and the place is history. My lungs scream for air, my muscles shake with the need to run, and my skin feels dry and parched. I shoot one arrow before mounting the Monstrous Nightmare.

With one flap, we're in the air, my body gasping for clean air. Unfortunately, the height of the flight, mixed with the nausea from the smoke, I lean to the side and convulse. I can feel the toxins leave me, but my throat's drier than ever.

I look back and the entire armory collapses. The fire spreads quickly along the dry dirt to whatever warehouses were unfortunate enough to be too close. I began to rethink where Alvin would've put my bow and arrows.

Now that I really think about it, I should've figured Alvin wouldn't put a weapon of such value simply among his others. So that his soldiers were so easily capable of reaching it and using it. He would keep it somewhere where he could constantly look at it and feel empowered.

I decide to head to the "Great Hall" here on Outcast Island. Near that dormant volcano. Near the gallows. Behind us the fire chews through the warehouses and small storage shacks, spitting sparks and embers toward the sky and gushing a cloud of black smoke in my wake.

I need to leave, but I need to at least get either my bow or arrow. I can't leave without them.

I steer the dragon to the Great Hall and we land with no issues. The distance from the armory to here is a good long run. So no guards are present. Now's the time. I leap off and sprint through the thick door and the Monstrous Nightmare follows. I push the door open with my elbow and run in.

Inside, there's the smell of lava and smoke. There's a circular fire pit like on Berk, only it looks like it was poorly cut from the stone. I look all around for my bow. It would be hung, somewhere. Where Alvin can see it. I look up and around and I finally see my bow hung on two hooks and strings directly above the fire pit.

As I run for it, suddenly a fist slams me in the jaw. It was so hard I see stars and I fumble back a few feet from the fire pit. I push myself on numb arms and try to clear my eyesight. I look up and see Alvin. His shadow looming over my, cracking his knuckles.

"You've got guts, Hiccup. I admire that." He says, but the darkness in his voice is haunting.

In reply, I spit a mouthful of saliva and blood to the side. My lower lip is swollen and bleeding. And my jaw feels dislocated, but it's probably not. I'm breathing heavy, and before I get to say anything, the Monstrous Nightmare pounds on Alvin, locking his jaws around him like a vise. I push to my knees and rush for my bow as Alvin tries to pry the dragon's jaw open.

I sprint toward the fire pit and with my momentum I flip to my hands and push myself upward. In midair, I turn so my back's facing the

fire, and snatch my bow as I dismount. I scream to the dragon, "I've got it!"

He looks and then throws Alvin all the way across the room, slamming him against the wall and falling. His impact against the wall left a wide, cracked dent. I climb onto the dragon and pat his neck for a job well done. We fly out of the Great Hall and into the village.

By now, the fire's starting to grow closer, but I can tell it's being contained. There's a forest not too far from the village, and there's a river less than one hundred and fifty yards to the west. I know it, and the dragon knows it too. We head for it in unspoken agreement.

As we fly, we avoid flaming arrows and catapults. I fire arrows at any I can get into range. And once we make it over the wall, freedom devours me from the inside. Finally being out of there, it's rejuvenating. But I need to stay focused as we aren't out of range of the arrows and that guards are pouring out of the iron gates.

The Monstrous Nightmare turns and bursts a fire that cuts off the guards' access to the woods. It chews through the forest like it's nothing. For two minutes, we fly with no problem. In the distance, I see the deep blue-black surface of the river glittering beneath the afternoon sun.

We fly further, and just when I think we're in the clear, suddenly the Monstrous Nightmare bucks up and down, screaming and wailing. "Whoa! Whoa!" I say, but it's too stunned. I look down and an arrow has shot it in the heart.

"No. No!" I scream. I look ahead and we're within jumping distance within the river. "Please, stay with me buddy. Just a little bit longer." I plead.

The dragon shakes his head and level's out, but the ride's rockier than before. We fly further down to the ground so we're no more than a few meters. The fire follows us, and catches on the dragon's tale. The smoke's increasing and the burning sensation returns times forty. My lungs burn, and my hands are raw from prying at the crates.

But I increase the pace as the wall of heat behind me whispers along my skin. We don't crash into the river, but a gigantic puddle of mud. I'm flung off the Monstrous Nightmare and land at the outside border of the puddle.

The Monstrous Nightmare screams and wails as he tries to move out of the mud. The substance making a deep \_slosh\_ sound as he moves. But it's no use, the mud saturates his wings, making it impossible to lift them. I crawl toward it as the flames come closer. I extend my hand to no avail.

But creature wails at me, telling me to run. But I can't leave it behind. Not after what it's just done for me. I whimper, unable to speak from the smoke. The dragon cries, but lowers his head into my lap. Tears sting my eyes, and suddenly I cradle the dragon's snout in my arms. I sob and suddenly I don't want to go.

The sound of pursuing Outcasts is heard in the distance. I jerk my head up and then look down to the dragon. The color fading from his

eyes. He breathes and a few of my tears drip onto his snout.

He lifts his head and roars at me to move. I force myself to stand and turn my back to the dragon. I sprint on my legs, refusing to look back. If I do, I'll never slip away. The fire is now ahead of me, and I have to climb up a tree to avoid getting burned.

I make my final leap and skid along a branch. I catch myself and grip a branch. I hold my bow close to my chest, and with one leap, I dive out of the trees and into the crisp, icy cold water.

### 30. Chapter 30

The water snatches me with icy arms as I plunge beneath its surface. The sound of the fire becomes muted, a distant roaring that can't compete with the swift rush of the river's current. I lose my grip on my bow as I'm flung downstream. I can't stop spinning. Can't break free of the current. Can't get to the surface.

My lungs burn, and my brain screams at me to take a breath, but I've spun so many times in the dark embrace of the river, I no longer know which way is up. I kick out, lash with my arms, and fight against the water.

It's useless.

My ears roar, and a strange hum grows louder within my brain as my chest convulses and I cough, sucking in a mouthful of water in exchange.

The water burns my lungs, and I cough again.

More water. More coughing. More pain.

And then it's gone. The pain recedes. My chest relaxes. My lungs stop demanding air. I'm at peace.

I let the current spin me as the world darkens into nothing. But something wraps around me, hauls me through the water, and I break the surface.

I cough feebly, but my lungs are used to water now. They don't know what to do with air. And I don't care. I want to close my eyes and let the water take me. Let the tiny sliver of peace I felt swallow me whole.

But I can't. Because whatever is holding me won't let me slide under the surface again. By the time we reach the shore, my lungs are burning for air, and the peace I felt is gone. I'm tossed onto the shore, flipped over on my back, and a shadow looms over me. It puts its hands together, one over the other, and slams them into my chest.

Water gushes up my throat, burning and suffocating, and fills my mouth and nose. The shadow reaches forward and turns my head to the side as I spew the water onto the sand. Twice more, it hits my chest and I have to spit out mouthfuls of water.

When it raises its hands a fourth time, my lungs contract, and I

start coughing on my own. It lowers its hands, turns me to my side so any water I cough up can dribble into the ground, and collapses next to me. Its breathing harsh.

I don't know how much time passes before I stop coughing and the world settles into focus.

"Are you okay?" it asks me. "Are you gonna live?"

My throat burns as I answer. "I'm fine."

It takes me a moment to realize it was the voice of a girl. Could it be the dandelion girl who saved me from death? A soft breeze kicks up as if on cue. The girl's hair sways and instead of dandelion, I catch the scent of lavender.

Lavender. Lavender!

I jerk my head up and see Skullette.

Skullette!

She's here. I haven't lost everything. Except probably my sanity.

I eye her up and down. She's dripping wet. Her hair emanates drips of the river at the ends, her clothes sticking to her beautiful body. Hugging her curves. No doubt she's the one who saved me. Her hair drapes around her exquisite face, deeply contrasting with her pale skin. But another closer look, and she's a little darker than the last time I remember. Which might've been weeks ago.

She's repositions herself, tucking her feet under her thighs. Her emerald eyes glisten like the river surface. They're wide with many emotions. But the most is longing. Her chest rises and falls in puffs of breath. My eyes unknowingly drift down the neckline of her blue outfit. The water sticks to her skin, her chest. Her breasts, and I blush. I didn't realize until just this minute they were so . . . substantial.

I force my eyes to scrape over her trim waist, but in seconds I'm staring once again at the glittering water along her neckline.

I don't want to admit my attraction to her is strong enough to rise above my grief and my sense of responsibility, but they're breasts. And with her outfit soaking wet, they're so highly . . . detailed. I force myself to look away as my cheeks grow warm.

She giggles. That beautiful thing that just emanates daylight and hope. I turn to face her and her eyes are watery. Not from the river water. Tears of her own creation. She leans in and our lips meet. The softness. The sweet scent of her skin. Her long eyelashes fluttering, tickling against my cheek. How I've longed to kiss her since the day of the ceremony.

To feel that burst of energy that drives me to get through anything. The kiss that gives me that fierce determination in times of despair. It feels so good. So incredibly good. And it's obvious she missed me too. When we pull away, I notice she has faded dark circles under her eyes. No doubt created from endless nights of no sleep.

My hand goes to her face. Her cheeks. Her smooth skin, glowing in the sunlight. Tears spill over on her cheeks. She holds my hand gently in both of hers and buries her head in my palm. Then she moves closer and we embrace each other in a hug. Strangely, this means more to me than a kiss. To feel her warmth against my own reminds me I'm still alive. I still have something worth fighting for.

When we let go, I sit up, digging my fingers into the wet sand beneath me as my head spins slowly, and look around us. Skullette stands as well, and though her knees wobble and her legs shake, she has no trouble remaining upright.

Nothing is familiar. I've traveled so far down the river. I've lost any place markers to show me where I am. The distant horizon is free of smoke, a clear indication I've traveled for miles in the swift embrace of the water.

"Where are we?" I ask, and wish for the hot, syrupy drink Mulch would give me for a sore throat.

The memory of Mulch stabs into me, and I force myself to breathe through it.

"Just outside the northern border of the wall surrounding the village." She tells me.

But if Skullette's here, then . . . my father. I look to her and she knows, "Are they here?" I ask.

She nods, "We've set up camp a good two hours walk back." she confirms.

I smile so broadly it feels like a grimace. I follow her back to the campsite. I unfasten my cloak, my fingers fumbling with the soggy leather bindings and take it off. The damp garment is dead weight against my shoulders, and I need the sun to dry my uniform and boot as we walk.

Along the way, we would alternate between talking and asking the other person questions on what's been happening with everyone lately.

Skullette's first.

She tells me about everyone's condition when they arrived back on Berk. Like I had imagined, everyone at the Dragon Academy were lost in their depression on losing me. Astrid especially. She spent most of her time alternating between axe chucking at trees and crying in the woods.

My father had gathered everyone in a meeting at the Great Hall almost immediately after they reached shore. He and Chief Boggs have been gathering plans to break me out. But thankfully with Skullette's reassurance, they remained as calm as they could get. Knowing I'd be able to break out sooner than they could plan.

But she tells me how the village felt practically empty without me. She told me how it felt weird to not hear the banging of my hammer on the anvil in the blacksmith's shop. To walk up to the arena and see nothing but weeping and sad dragons. Toothless took a hard fall



to.

I can easily imagine. My last words to him were to go away and leave me at the hands of the Outcasts. Something I know he'll never forget. Now he'll be even more protective of me the minute we're reunited. After he's done licking off my skin from excitement.

She tells me about how they were each other's company during the long weeks that I've been gone. A glance at the sky tells me we still have four hours until sunset. As we're walking, I see Skullette has a large pack on her back. It's really big, almost reaching down to her knees.

Wait. A pack.

\_My bow!\_

Skullette looks to me and sees my face. Without a word, she takes off the pack, sets it on the ground, and pulls out my bow and sheath of arrows. Relief floods through my soaked body, warming me to the core. Enough to tolerate the shivering that soon comes after a breeze blows through the trees.

She digs deeper until she fishes out the knives, sheaths and awl I stole from Alvin. She picks up one knife in particular, a dainty thing with a four inch blade. Once side jagged, the other a smoother surface for carving.

"You can have it." I say. She turns her head to me and smiles, then gives me a hug as a thank you. As she slides her skirt up her leg to strap her knife sheath to her thigh, I turn around and begin rummaging aimlessly through my sheath of arrows.

I lug the sheath over my back and sling the bow over my shoulder. Skullette reaches a hand out for my cloak and carries it on her arm.

I frown, "You don't have to do that."

"It's heavy. I'll carry it for you until you're feeling a bit stronger." She says.

"It's fine. I can handle it." I assure, but she gives me a look that says she doesn't believe me.

"You're in no shape to carry it." She says.

I'm about to protest, until the pain of my rib comes back with a hard slam in my sternum. I hug my middle and nearly double over, but I stop myself before I drop to my knees. I inhale a sharp breath and stand straight.

"Maybe I should help you." Skullette gently suggests, but I shrug her off.

"I'm fine." I say.

"Do you need anything?" she asks, and it sounds like she really wants to know.

Mulch, alive and unharmed. Toothless, by my side. Dad, waiting for me with reassurance and a plan, able to help me figure out what to do next. Alvin, dead at my feet.

"Hiccup? What do you need?"

Looking her in the eye, I say, "Revenge. I need revenge."

Her eyes darken and she slides away from me as she hefts the pack over her shoulder. "Look Hiccup, I know you've been through a lot, but try not to harshly judge those of us with more than that left to live for," she says, and starts up the bank.

Does she think I have so little left to live for? I have Toothless. I have Dad. And I have a score to settle. None of these can be taken lightly. I clench my teeth around the words that want to burst free and scorch the air around me. But arguing with her will only make things worse. Especially after my previous traumatizing moment still fresh in her mind.

Instead, I run up to match her pace. I take her bicep and turn her to me. She holds my gaze, and I give her a sweet kiss on the lips. She tilts her head like she does, and I feel her nose brush against mine. We part, our foreheads still touching. We open our eyes and I intertwine our fingers as we hold hands.

Our trip was soon delayed a day as the sun had set, leaving us with no clear light to see the path Skullette had marked while on her way to the river. She had originally gone out hunting, until she, thankfully, stopped by the river to drink. That's when she found me.

If it weren't for her, I would've been swept up by the river, forever lost without my family, friends, and vengeance. I practically owe her my life.

We stop for the night in the shelter of a metallic box of a building with only two sides still standing against the ravages of time and weather. The twisted metal of other buildings that once housed a vibrant civilization are now blackened husks coated in ash and wrapped with kudzu. Walking among them makes me nervous.

I turn my back to the ruins of the city and refuse to consider the idea that I may have just glimpsed my future.

Skullette and I haven't talked much since our words on the riverbank, and that's fine with both of us. We have nothing left to say. And I just want this leg of the journey to be over with. I want to be back with Dad, and Gobber.

Thankfully Skullette has flint and fuel in her pack, so we don't have to worry about keeping ourselves warm or keeping wild animals at bay. I work with Skullette to gather firewood and stack it in the center of the makeshift shelter. She also has a flask of freshwater, and she offers it to me.

I lay her pack against one of the still-standing walls of our shelter and grab my bow and arrows.

"Where are you going?" she asks as I stride out of the shelter.

"To catch dinner."

"I'll come with you."

I toss a glance over my shoulder. After careful thinking, I accept her offer. It's been a long time since I last went hunting with Skullette. It became one of the things I took pleasure and joy from. Spending endless hours with her, alone in the shelter of the woods. Back when there wasn't anything that kept us apart. Besides my job at the Academy. I'd rather spend time hunting with her than be alone with just my thoughts of the horror I've endured.

Perhaps with her presence with me, I'll find comfort. Besides, together, we can both take down more game than a group of Viking hunters. The teamwork we share is something more than just simple coordination, it's something deeper, and I know it somehow connects back to our relationship.

Our shelter is settled against a soft swell of land covered in tall grass already gone to seed. Beyond the hill, the broken remains of an old road wind through the grass and disappear for yards at a time. On the other side of the road, a copse of trees stretches as far as I can see.

Even with the sun gone, we're gifted with a beautiful full moon to provide light in the darkness. Even without it, Skullette and I can easily take down prey in, almost, complete darkness and still take it down with one arrow.

We enter the trees, walk twenty yards into the middle of them, their skinny trunks and thin, graceful branches reaching for the heavens as if hoping to scrape against the stars, and find what I'm looking for.

A bush hugs the base of a tree, its branches curving like a bell, its leaves brushing the ground. Beneath it, a small, hollow space rests, and we crawl inside. I string an arrow, Skullette pulls her knife from its sheath strapped to her thigh; palming the hilt. And we wait.

The stars have been sprinkled along the black velvet sky when I finally catch a glimpse of movement. I tense, hardly daring to breathe. Our patience is rewarded as a creature about the size of a small sheep wanders close, nose to the ground, snuffing. I draw in a slow deep breath, rehearse each step in my mind, and then whip the bow up, close one eye to sight down the center, and release the arrow.

It flies true, striking the side of the animal, and Skullette leaps from the cover as our quarry jerks around and starts to run with faltering steps. Crossing the distance between us in seconds, Skullette yanks her knife up, leaps on the animal's back, and swings her arm beneath its neck to slice open its throat.

It dies instantly, and she wipes her knife clean on the ground beside it. Retrieving my arrow, I clean it as well and pack my weapon away. Flipping the animal over, I see we've caught a boar. A young one by the size of its tusks.

I can't easily lift it, plus I refuse to get its blood all over me. The thought makes bile surge up in my throat, and I cough, gag, and spit on the forest floor. Skullette solves the problem by sawing off a branch big enough for both of us to carry on out shoulder, and ties its legs to each end.

This solves the worry of dragging it across the grass and broken pieces of road to our shelter where the trails of blood could possibly lead a wild animal straight to us while we sleep.

Once back at the shelter, I lay out my cloak, which has by now dried, while Skullette pulls her knife from its sheath and carves into the boar; separating muscle from bone with swift hacking motions. She tosses choice pieces of meat onto the flames to sizzle and snap. I then skewer three large pieces of meat on a stick and hand it to her.

She denies it and insists I have it. I'm grateful and sink my teeth into the meat. My mouth floods with saliva and the juice is so greasy that when I yank it away, some grease drips down my chin.

Skullette laughs, then takes her thumb, running it up the trail of grease, wiping it from the corner of my mouth, then bringing it to her lips, and sucking the grease away. I smile as I lick my lips to lick away the rest of the grease.

As we finish what we can stomach, we wrap the rest in palm leaves and stow them away in Skullette's pack. We leave the fire, knowing it'll go out on its own. Skullette joins me, sprawling across my cloak, snuggling close to me as the sound of night animals echo through the woods.

With her back to my front, I drape my hand over her hip, and she brings her hand to mine, intertwining our fingers. My nose rests on the crown of her head, and I inhale her lavender scent. I missed her. More than I thought I would.

The slap of embarrassment I since felt every time I thought of her is gone. In its place, I see Skullette sacrificing sleep so she can plan on finding me when I was captured. Offering to teach me to hunt and helping me hold on to the good memories I have of my old life. Ready her arrow against Alvin, despite overwhelming odds, to protect me. Skullette is the lodestone I cling to when grief of Mulch and fear for my people and Dad threaten to rob me of what little hope I have left.

Something in me has awakened and responds only to Skullette. I lie sleepless long after she's already drifted. I press my fingers to my lips as I remember her leaning in, her breath fanning my face, her eyes locked to my mouth. A delicious ache pulses through me. I feel like a stranger waking up in my own skin "aware of every inch. Heat runs through my veins, both exhilarating and terrifying.

Exhilarating because every part of me tingles with life. But terrifying because beneath the longing lies an inescapable truth: If she's the lodestone, it's because somehow in the last few months I've to rely on her. Lean on her. Need her. My heart pounds a little faster as the realization sinks in.

I need Skullette.

Not because I need saving. Not because she can plan her way out of sticky situations. But because on some basic, soul-deep level within me, she is the solid ground beneath my feet. The one who will move mountains to keep her promises. The one who looks at me, and \_sees\_.

I can't imagine my life without her.

Everywhere I look, she's there. A constant thread binding my past, my present, and the future I want so badly to have with her.

With \_her\_.

My eyes fly open.

I'm in love with Skullette.

Not the way I thought I was. That love was uncomplicated and innocent, designed for a simple life. The love consuming me now is fierce and absolute – forged in a crucible of loss and united by our shared strength.

\_I love Skullette\_. A laugh bubbles up, even as tears sting my eyes. I reach over and brush a few strands of her hair out of her face. Her smooth skin looking unworldly in the moonlight. I lean over and kiss the crook of her neck, then the spot where her jaw meets her neck, her cheek, her brow bone, her temple, then even behind her ear.

She stirs and a soft moan passes her perfect lips. She looks like a goddess. Her long black hair fanned out around her head. Her body positioned so her curves help form a perfect "S". God damn she's so beautiful. She's everything. Everything that's beautiful. I can't find the words to explain.

I interlock our fingers again and settle down closer. The fire now a soft glow in the darkness. The promises she's made to me, are not represented by some material object; like a necklace or bracelet. But she, herself. She is the symbol of her promises to me. I hold the tender, vibrant thought of her close as the stars chase away one another across the sky.

### 31. Chapter 31

Dawn is a whisper in the cold morning air as I tighten the leather fastenings on my cloak. Skullette adjusts her travel pack until it fits smoothly against her spine. The morning dew hangs just as heavy in the air as it does on the ground, and large fields of waist-high grass ripples sluggishly beneath the half-hearted breeze.

Halfway through the next day's travel, we finally reach the clearing where Skullette said they had posted camp. I pull the hood of my cloak up over my head as we approach the camp. In the dead center, there's an enormous fire pit that has several men – including my father, Gobber and Chief Boggs.

They turn their heads and Skullette is the first they notice. Their looks become questionable as their eyes lay on me. I can't help but

smile. Astrid and the others are gathered too. Astrid's sitting on a wooden box, elbows to her knees. Her head braced between her fists.

"Skullette, who do you have here?" my father asks. His hand already going to the hilt of his sword.

"A friend." She says and when she smiles, everyone's face goes into bewilderment.

I step closer, then bring my hand forward, and pull my hood back. The button unlatches on its own and puddles at my feet. My father's face becomes a mixture of emotions.

"Hiccup . . . ?"

"Hi Dad." I say.

He comes over and lays a hand on my shoulder as if testing to see if I'm really there. Then he pulls me into a tight hug. The pain in my rib explodes, but I don't tell him to let go. I wrap my arms around his neck and bury into his beard.

Gobber's next and he gives me a more gentle hug, then suddenly I have the entire camp surrounding me. Padding me on the back, giving me endless hugs. I try to shrug off the pain until Astrid gives the most constricting bear hug I've ever had. I wince, but I hold her close. The pain only means how much she missed me.

When she's done, she looks up to me and sees my face, "What's wrong?"

"Broken rib."

"What happened?" she asks while Skullette places her pack next to the fire.

"It's been broke since I had a fight with Alvin in the dungeon." I say, holding my middle. "I don't know how long it's been broken, but it still hurts a little." I say.

"Well then, let's get you to Goathy and-"

Dad's voice is cut off by the sound of a shrieking in the distance. Suddenly I'm pounded into the ground by Toothless. I don't even have to laugh as he's licking me nonstop. Switching between licking and nuzzling close to my face.

I don't tell him to get off, and no one pulls him off despite my broken rib. All I do is hold his head and hug him by his neck. The feeling of his cold, scaly skin feels comforting. Just like the time he had been gone for days during Snoggletog.

Finally he gets off once I'm practically drenched in his saliva, and I push myself up, wiping my wet face with my hand.

My father laughs, "Why don't you go, rinse off, then we'll bring you to Goathy."

"Kay Dad." I say.

Then I'm escorted to the river a few yards away from the border of the camp. I'm given two guards to watch me, and while it's really uncomfortable, I don't argue since, as expected, they'll be more protective of me than ever.

I quickly rinse off, and after I'm dry, I'm lead to my tent and given a simple shirt and pants with my usual boot. My Dragon Conqueror suit was given to the seamstresses to sew and stitch, while I go to Goathy for the same treatment.

I was so caught up in seeing Skullette again the pain of the welts on my hands didn't even register. But now they've blistered a little since my escape from the Outcasts. Goathy traces her slender, bony fingers over the welts, then after applying simple burn medicine, she looks to treating my ribs.

With a smooth pull, I pull my shirt off and fold it in my lap. I can see my reflection on the cross axes posted on the side of the tent's supports. It's now ugly black and purple bruises spreading like decaying blossoms across my chest. Goathy writes in the dirt and Gobber translates.

She wants me to lift my arms above my head to see if I feel any pain. If I do, they'll need to work overnight to fix me. But I don't feel any pain. Which means the rib is close to being healed, but it been delayed since my chaotic escape. So all she does is apply a smooth layer of solvent to dull the pain, and then wraps my ribs in gauze.

I join the other men around the fire and I'm given an overdose of beets, yak milk, and some of the meat from the wild boar Skullette and I shot. I haven't eaten a full meal since I've been in the dungeon, so swallowing this meal is a little hard, and the rest I give to Toothless. He snuggles down at my foot and purrs nonstop.

"Better than when you were gone." Says Gobber. "He wouldn't stop howling until you got back."

I laugh and pat his head and he opens his eyes and lifts his head and licks my chin. "I missed you too, bud." He replies to me with a deep but high-toned guttural purr.

I chuckle and resume to eating my remaining food. I listen to the men converse while I eat. I'm not in much of a mood to talk, and they easily understand. As I'm finishing my glass of yak milk, I look to my right and see Astrid. She's so pale. Ghostly white. I look to her in confusion.

She gets up and walks over to me. This motion seems to catch everyone's attention, including my father, and the conversations go silent. I don't move as Astrid's fingers gently slide onto the skin on my neck. As if by magic, Astrid's concern goes to immediately feeling sick.

Suddenly, after a slight pinch of pain, I remember.

The insignia of the Outcasts is burned into my skin.

Astrid retreats her hand as I move my own to the spot on my neck. From the feel of it, the burn is now a welt of blistered red skin turning black at the edges. My father comes over and his face is full of hatred, rage and guilt.

"He's been branded." He whispers, but it looks like he shouted it across a valley from the looks of the men surrounding the fire. Gobber joins my father at his side and his eyes water.

My heart pounds in my ears as Toothless sniffs the burn and tries to lick it, but it only stings. I wince and clasp my hand over it. Everyone's looks make me feel so self-conscious. I'm marked for life by the man everything in me, and everyone else longs to destroy. Every time anyone looks at me, they'll know Alvin once had me at his mercy and proved to be stronger.

Dad calls Goathy over and she brings some antiseptic. I sit still as she dabs it across my wound. Slouching away dead skin and trying her best not to hurt me. I can see Astrid out of the corner of my eye, trying not to gag at the sight.

I can see Dad too. And the look on his face ices me to the core. He wants to torture Alvin before he dies. Hear him scream for mercy and know he has the power to deny him. The thought, I can tell, fills him with a heady sense of power, and his lips peel back from his teeth into a snarl as Goathy gently cuts away the blackened skin at the edge of the wound.

I stir restlessly as she spreads the salve over the burn and attach a fresh patch of gauze. "Thank you." I say in a raspy tone, and she nods her head and gives me a weak, pitiful smile.

Dad walks over and kneels down in front of me. His large hand goes to my face, his palm touching my cheek. My father, whom I've never seen cry, has tears in his eyes. His lip slightly quivers as his same hand moves to the hair that dangles over my forehead. He takes his fingers and sways them out of my face.

"My boy." He almost whimpers. And before the tears get the chance to spill over, I lean forward and hug him tight.

He wraps his arms around me, and I pat his back. I can just see the original plan in his head — the one where I shoot Alvin dead in the arena — just changing in his head.

He might not be able to torture Alvin. He might not be able to make him beg. But he'll make sure that Alvin's death is so horrific, so legendary, that for the rest of my life whenever anyone sees the mark on my neck, they won't see a man who was once broken before his enemy. They'll see the mark of a man, who helped destroy the most feared man in our world, and they'll tread with caution.

I can't allow it. I'm only hoping that Dad still has enough sense to remember that Alvin is mine. And my dream of vengeance and revenge is all riding on my killing him. But I let him hold the thought close as he releases me, stands up, and walks back to his tent.

Goathy writes me that I'm supposed to take it easy the next few days until my rib heals. I'm happy to oblige, and I toss my milk into the fire, then heading to my tent.



I snuggle down in my blankets and Toothless circles me and lies down so that our heads are close. I pet his snout and he purrs. He opens his eyes, and the green orbs stare down into my soul. I'm immensely grateful that he's the only one Alvin hasn't hurt. Both physically and emotionally. Or at least not as severe. Compared to what I've seen, to what Toothless has seen, and he's still the same old dragon that I befriended in the woods. All those days back.

Back to when I had a good life and didn't even know it. This life seems like it's a nightmare. And someday I'll wake up; and I'll find Mulch alive and well, Bucket mentally stable, dragons free and soaring in the skies. Just peace, on the island of Berk.

Holding this thought close, I close my eyes and drift to sleep as Toothless breathes steadily beside me, and the rain taps lightly against the cloth of the tent.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast of dried fruit, I saddle up Toothless and we go flying together. Wrapped in clouds, we take things steady and fly smoothly across the sky. We avoid doing any flips since I'm still recovering from my rib; but the pain feels less than before and compared to how I felt in the dungeon, I could do endless flips and spirals. But of course I promised Goathy I'd keep things slow.

I guess I can allow it. In retrospect, I deserve a breather.

Toothless and I make sure to stay close to the campsite in case of emergencies. And while I want to get that usual adrenaline rush I always get from flying, just cruising in the sky is enough. Seeing as how I'm taking a rest, this is my grace period.

We fly for almost half the day, heading back to camp once the lunch bell is sounded. We land and Toothless follows me all throughout the camp, never leaving my side and I don't ask him to. He's been away from me for so long, I want to spend a much time with him as possible. As we sit around the fire, Astrid, Skullette and the others join us.

Fighlegs sits on my left while Skullette's on my right. Then Astrid, then Snotlout and the twins sit across the pit. As Snotlout and the Tuffnut carry on a conversation, I look up and see Hookfang walk up behind Snotlout. Immediately the memory of the blue Monstrous Nightmare returns to my thoughts and refuses to subside.

My heart beats fast and I push myself off my seat on shaky legs. I place my plate on my seat and walk slowly over to Hookfang. Snotlout looks up at me and gives me a weird look, "What are you doing?" he asks. But I just keep walking over to Hookfang.

When he sees me getting close, he raises his head. "I'd be careful," Snotlout warns. "He's been in a bad mood all day."

His words barely register as I continue to see flashes of the other Nightmare, dying in a puddle of mud. I extend my arm and Hookfang lowers his head and places his snout on my hand. I can see Snotlout giving me a dirty look. I can't help but weakly smile knowing that he's jealous his dragon like me better than him.

But I quickly wipe the smile away as I rub Hookfang's snout. Tears sting my eyes, and I clench my jaw so tight my teeth grind together. Hookfang looks me in the eyes and as if he read my mind, his eyes narrow and he inches his head closer.

Then, I begin to sob.

I hug Hookfang's snout and begin to cry and sob so hard I fall to my knees. Hookfang follows so I don't lose my grip. He quietly purrs as wave after wave of sobs wrecks my body.

"I'm so sorry." I whisper to him. He continues to purr as if he's saying, "It's okay. It's okay."

To be honest, I don't even know why I'm crying. Could it be that I'm still mourning the loss of the dragon? Because I watched him die right in front of me like Hunter or Mulch? Or because he died trying to keep me alive. Just like everyone else in the army is doing, giving up their lives just to save mine.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and I know it's Skullette. She doesn't need to ask why I'm sad. Why I'm suddenly crying out of nowhere. She, as well as everyone else, knows that I've witnessed a dragon's death right before my eyes. I never thought the death of a dragon would hit me so hard.

It's almost as if it's as bad as watching a soldier die. I never thought it would mean so much to me. Maybe even more.

My grip on Hookfang's snout loosens and he lifts it out of my arms. He breathes on my face to get my attention; blowing my hair out of my eyes. I wipe my eyes and look up and he licks my cheek.

I rub his snout again and whisper, "I'm so sorry."

He purrs and nuzzles my cheek. With that I turn to Skullette, but don't get up. She kneels down next to me, her hand still on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry Hiccup."

"I have to go back." I say. I turn to face Skullette as worry and surprise come across her face. "I need to say goodbye to him. Properly."

She doesn't protest and even agrees to ride Hookfang while I ride with Toothless. Dad, Astrid, the twins, and Fishlegs all ride together to the site near the river where the Nightmare couldn't make it to the river with me. Snotlout rides with Astrid as we near the location. Up ahead, water glistens beneath the afternoon sun, a piercing beauty that hurts my eyes.

But once we reach the puddle of mud, it's like I've been away for months, years at the sight. I don't find life, but death is waiting for me near the edge of the trees. The Nightmare still lies in the puddle of mud, now dried and hardened like stone. Forever freezing the dragon in the last horrid frame of his life.

The bones of his face nearly picked clean by scavengers but the mark of the Outcast's knife still in his neck. The small puncture wound rests over his heart. The others gag and get queasy at the gruesome

sight, but I don't tear my eyes away from this. I did this. I deserve to have the spirit of the dragon torment me in my dreams.

\_I did this. \_

Hookfang walks up the dragon and the two look completely opposite with the color of their skin. Hookfang's red-orange blaze against the other Nightmare's ocean and sky-blue.

Thankfully for me, its eyes are closed, giving me a little relief of having to look it in the eyes again. Only to see death, instead of its life fading with every passing second.

He was murdered efficiently, and the ramification chills me to the core.

Hookfang sniffs the dragons head and snout. I can see his claws stiffen. Then that's when he lifts his head, and screams. So full of pain and agony, it ices my blood. He keeps this up and soon Stormfly, Barf and Belch, Toothless and Tornado have all joined in. Creating a chorus of mourning riding all through the forest. Through the trees. Down the riverbank. Tainting the sky.

Dad comes to my side and places a hand on my shoulder. I flashback to Hunter's death, and how we floated him down the river. Dad had begun to sing to mourn the loss. This is the same only for dragons.

"Hiccup," Skullette says. Her voice is quiet, pained. Her fingers curl around mine and force them open, and I realize I've clenched my fists so tight, my nails have gouged four crescents of crimson into my palm. The blood mixes in my hands and I can't look away.

Words won't come. Maybe they don't exist. I strain to feel it. To let it cut me so I can cry again. So I can share the grief with the one person who will understand the depth of what I've lost.

I feel Skullette's thumb wiping away the blood, and I withdraw my hand. "Please don't." I say, and she looks to me in confusion. "I deserve to bleed. I earned this. I did this. I deserve to be marked." I say as I hold up my hands.

"No." she takes my hands in hers. "You don't."

It's useless to argue. I know what I've become inside. And if she can't see it now, it won't take long before she does. I can't escape this hell. No one will ever change this animal I have become.

"I know something that'll help." She says, and I look and see she has a gentle smile on her face.

"What?" I ask.

She takes my hand and leads me into the woods. A few steps in, and a large bank of wildflowers grows. Beautiful blossoms of blue, white, violet, yellow and pink. But all I see is the color crimson. The crimson blossoms that bloomed when Mulch was stabbed and forever taken from me.

Skullette just smiles softly and takes my hand. Everyone else follows

and they see the flowers. We each gather a good armful and come back to the dragon. Gobber had tagged along and had packed a net. Skullette and I spend the next half hour wreathing the net with bright colors. Slowly, stem by stem.

Meanwhile, Astrid and Gobber and Dad decorate the border of the once mud-puddle with white flowers. Ruffnut weaves a few purple and blue ones into a crown of flowers. Covering the ugly wound.

Then once Skullette and I are done, Gobber and Dad go to the other side of the puddle, and we cast the net over the Nightmare's body. The flowers sway and once over the dragon, they all combine into a beautiful gathering, adorning every inch of the dragon so nothing of its terrible death can penetrate through.

Only the promise of a better life. I imagine the dragon sleeping in a meadow. Free of danger, blood, Outcasts. And with nothing to do but fly through the fresh air. Wild and free.

We all then gather near the edge of the puddle where the dragon's had rests. With another look, he looks at peace, and I can almost not even see the dragon that die in a fire. Almost.

After we have a moment of silence, we all hop aboard our dragons, Skullette riding with me this time, and we head back to the camp. I feel a little bit better. I feel like I have a little bit of closure with him, but it still doesn't mean my debt's been paid. I add him to the list of those I need to avenge to Alvin.

Skullette wraps her arms around my torso and rests her chin on my shoulders. I relax a little and take a deep breath.

She leans her head against mine and we fly back to the camp.

Once back, Dad gathers everyone around the fire to discuss the plan on invading the Outcast village. As we sit, I look at my hands and see the blood. I cover my hands with my cloak as the fire cracks.

I try to listen to my Dad over the cracking. Though it seems like it's drowning him out.

According to Dad, they're now ready to complete the final phase of taking Alvin out of power. The numerous barrels of Monstrous Nightmare saliva have all been smuggled into the village and now wait to be ignited. How?

We storm the city on our dragons, then once the entire army of soldiers is out in the open, an armada aerial attack of dragons will fly overhead and fire at the barrels. With the undercover Vikings still in the city, they'll send a signal to let us know where to fire. The idea is to set the entire city ablaze, enough to scare the citizens out and Alvin too, hopefully.

If we're provoked into attacking, we are to only fire at the soldiers and avoid any villagers unless they attack first. The barrels are going to be scattered all across the village, and one of our undercover men managed to get Alvin to buy enough of the barrel's so that with one shot from Toothless, will blow the entire thing to smithereens. I tell dad about the prisoners in Alvin's dungeon and I tell them about Rachel. They promise to rescue the prisoners before

they set Alvin's place ablaze. We set for the village at dawn.

Once the meeting is adjourned, I'm escorted to the seamstresses' tent to fetch my Dragon Conqueror uniform. The thing looks brand new and I thank the ladies for their hard work. The thing's been through a lot. When I arrive back at my tent, I decide to go through some of the pockets and am shocked when I find an Oleander berry still perfectly preserved from when I was locked in Alvin's dungeon.

I roll it between my thumb and pointer finger, then I carefully place it back into the pocket concealing it, and continue to rummage through my uniform. My fingers clasp around something hard and pointy.

My heart rate speeds up as I pull it out.

The arrowhead I'd been given to by the Outcast who helped me back in Tower 3. It's still here. It managed to survive through everything. I completely forgot about it.

I clutch it with desperate fingers. Suddenly remembering that mutual feeling of trust I felt towards him. I hold it so close to my chest that I swear it could pierce my heart if it keeps beating so fast. This must be a sign of hope that all of my suffering and loss will pay off. All of the sacrifices set by those will not die in vain.

I keep the arrowhead close to my chest as I drift off to sleep.

## 32. Chapter 32

Twice, I've slept for a handful of hours, only to wake on the heels of terrifying dreams with a sense of dread churning through my system. The pain refuses to relinquish even during sleep, but I can't afford to give into it. The grace period has ended.

Dawn is a faint gray smudge on the horizon as we ready the dragons. I look to where the sun is just peeking over, and my heart speeds. The steady silence before an epic battle is haunting. Toothless nudges my hand and I naturally lift it and scratch his head.

I'm changed into my Dragon Conqueror suit with my cloak on and the hood pulled forward so it covers most of my face. I stare down at my hands. The blood from my crescent wounds still stains. I don't know why I didn't bother to wash it. Probably because I didn't want to.

I need it.

I \_want\_ it.

I deserve it.

So what if they can see the darkest side of me. The secret side of me I never let anyone see, or even knew existed. I keep it caged but I can't control it. It's ugly. That \_beast\_, is ugly. When I feel the rage, I just can't hold it. It comes awake and I can't control it. I feel it deep within, it's just beneath my skin. It's almost like it's hiding, in my body and in my head.

And if I let him out, he'll tear me up and break me down.

No one can change what I've become. We all believe it's not the real me. But what can I do? I need someone to help me tame this animal. Save me from it, and make it end.

I hate what I've become. And yet the nightmare's just begun. It's hiding in the dark; its teeth are razor sharp.

There's no escape for me.

It wants my soul.

It wants my heart.

My thoughts cloud my head so much, that when I feel a hand on my shoulder I yelp. I turn and find Dad a little startled.

"Oh, sorry Dad. You scared me." I say.

"Yeah I saw that. Are you okay?" he asks.

"A little on edge." I admit.

"You'll be okay. We'll get through this, together." He says, and as if to clarify, he paces his hand on my shoulder.

Gobber calls the dragons and army in line. I hop on Toothless, and as I lean forward, I see my hand shaking. Soft, dainty hands envelop them and I look up and find Skullette. She looks as scared as I do. I can see it in her emerald eyes. The eyes that mine search desperately for in times of danger and darkness.

We stare at each other as our hands intertwine. I get off of Toothless and I bring her into my arms. For the past few months, my arms have been the only refuge for her from the world. She rests her head on my chest, her arms wound around my neck. She draws a shaky breath. Her heart pounding so strong that I swear I think it'll pop out of her chest. She lifts her head and we face each other.

My hands fall to her waist and hers trace along my shoulders, down to my chest where she feels my heartbeat. It matches hers. The rhythm perfectly in unison. A thousand moments surge through me. We've both been through so much. And together, we forged something new. Something beyond explanation.

I look at her from head to toe. Her hair is the same. Beautiful and long, reaching her stomach. The blue of her outfit that closely resembles the night sky. Her sheath of arrows and her bow slung over her shoulder. Her green eyes that will always find mine even in a crowd. Her fair pale skin that could easily blend with the snow on Berk.

And her lips. Oh her lips. Perfectly soft, smooth. Sensitive. With the ability to consume every fear, every loss, every lost emotion that eats away at me. She takes the pain I feel. Oh how I adore her. How I thirst for her. How I need her.

I lift my hand and slide my palm across her cheek. My thoughts drift back to the first day I even met her. Leading all the way up to now,

this moment. How we've bonded. Grown. Matured. Explored the other's emotion, and how we've found love. Our hands find each other, holding fast to a part of our lives that Alvin has somehow failed to destroy.

I tilt her chin up to me, and after she blinks. I lean down, she stands up on her tiptoes, and our lips meet. She tilts her head as if by instinct. The kiss deepens. She tangles her fingers in my hair, and I let out a soft throaty moan. My lips drift to the soft skin on her neck, her shoulder.

She presses her body close to me, not allowing any space to be between us. I find my way back to her lips and receive another kiss. This kiss was different than the others. It was more meaningful, more passionate. And I loved it.

I loved her.

"I love you." I say as our lips part.

"I love you too. Always will." She says without the slightest hesitation.

Our foreheads are touching and I can see her smile on her face. A reflection of my own. Her hands go back to my shoulder and we embrace in a hug. I take one last moment to memorize her completely.

Lips red as roses.

Hair black as a Night Fury's wings.

Skin white as snow.

Gobber soon calls everyone and I head Dad give orders to line up. I help her mount Toothless and then I mount too. With one flap we're in the air and heading to the village. The ride ended too soon. While the rest of the dragons stay behind with Spitelout to wait for the signal, Gobber hops aboard Tornado with Dad and Astrid, the twins, Fishlegs and Snotlout and I ride ahead to the city.

When we're about a yard from the wall, Skullette takes one of my explosive arrows and loads it in her bow. She shoots it at a steep angle so it explodes in the dead center of the village. The villagers' reaction is immediate. A guard in a turret closest to us, spots us. He readies his cross bow, but is one second too late as Skullette has shot him dead before he can say halt.

The dragons fly overhead and after the citizens catch a good look at me and Toothless, they run and scream in fear. We descend until we hover a few meters above the ground. The sound of the dragons' fire rip through the crowd, and several people near us slump to the ground. Screams pierce the air as a second round mows down another group behind us.

Fire bursts from the dragons' mouths as they strafe the wall. The stone is scorched black. Suddenly the ground shakes and in an instant, the Whispering Death dragon explodes into the air in a shower of cobblestone, dirt, and fire. He breathes his deadly rings and immediately plunges into the ground again.

Skullette and I drop to the streets just as an alarm has been sounded. An Outcast near me hears my footfall and turns, his weapon drawn and I drop to my knees, grab the dagger in my boot, and thrust it up as his momentum drives his abdomen onto my blade.

Before he has a chance to do more than hiss out a breath, I lunge to my feet, grab his head with both hands and wrench it to the side. His neck grinds and pops, his body goes slack, and I let him drop with a heavy thud.

I race to join Skullette as plumes of thick black smoke billow up from the city. The turret closest to us explodes into flame and slowly topples to the ground in a hail of sparks and fiery chunks of wood.

The citizens of the Outcast village are screaming in agony. The barrels are working well. Too well. My stomach sinks as we take in the chaos. Everything is burning. Everything. Brilliant gold and crimson flames chew through homes, spew thick, black smoke toward the sky, and race blindly for the next piece of dry wood. Windows explode outward, sending hundreds of diamond-bright slivers of glass through the air.

And through it all, the monstrous shapes of dragons coil, lashing out with their tails to crush wagons, buildings . . . and people. Strafing entire streets with blistering fire. Bellowing a hoarse guttural cry that shakes the ground.

The few people still on their feet are running in a blind panic. The alarm doesn't stop. It's so piercing that I feel an impulse to cover my ears. Soon soldiers are pouring from the fortress that supposedly houses Alvin. All we need to do is set it on fire, like everything else. As fire leaps from building to building, street to street, intent on destroying everything the entire South Market, the second armada of dragons soon appear, heading toward the North Hub, blasting anything that moves with flames.

Everything that moves is a target. Outcast, Viking, citizen, who knows? Heart pounding, adrenaline burning through me, everyone is my enemy. Except for Skullette. My hunting partner, the one person who has my back. There's nothing to do but move forward, killing whoever comes into our path. Toothless stays glued to my side. I take notice Skullette's running low on arrows.

We encounter a wounded Outcast. He's been shot in the side, but it's not enough to bring him down. He has a fully loaded sheath of arrows on his back. I knee him in the side of the head and take his sheath. After a brief thanks, Skullette resumes firing.

Screaming people, bleeding people, dead people everywhere.

As we reach the next block, I pull Skullette toward a side street that isn't yet on fire. I had lost my father and Gobber and practically everyone in the midst as visibility reduces to my hand extended in front of my face. It takes an agonizing three minutes to find what we need. In that time, another barrel turns the North Hub into a blazing inferno. I pray the citizens there heard the screaming of their neighbors and had enough warning to start running.

I grit my teeth and run, leaping over dead bodies, feet slipping in



the gore. The wind whips the embers of crumpled buildings and the smoke into blinding swirls. We decide that flying is the best to see what's happening. We hop aboard Toothless and takeoff. The sky's a haze of thick black smoke. Entire streets are nothing but sheets of flame. I adjust my foot and we head dive toward Alvin's compound.

"Hiccup, get down!" Skullette hisses. We drop where we are.

It was a rough one though. I fly off of Toothless and my face lands in a still-warm pool of someone's blood, but I play dead, remain motionless as the sudden wave of fire herds toward me. Toothless covers me in time and I push myself up, vomiting when the blood permeates my mouth.

"Skullette! Skullette" I yell in a panic.

"Hiccup!" I here I reply.

I look and see her trying to help a panicked horse stomping in a double-stall animal shed. Next to the horse was a wagon. I stare at the wagon and shake, but I sprint over and help Skullette hitch the horse to the wagon as fast as we can. She takes the driver's seat as I hop back on Toothless. She cracks the reins against the horses back and we thunder toward the destruction.

A few people still stagger about, and we stop and haul them into the wagon. They don't even hesitate when they see me. Most of the east quarter is in shambles, but set apart from the rest of Alvin's dungeon, untouched by fire. I calculate less than ten minutes before the flames bridge the distance and begin destroying it. Which means Rachel and the other prisoners face a terrible death if I can't figure out a way to free them in time.

"Skullette!" I scream, and she turns. "We need to find my Dad!"

She looks and sees the compound and nods. While I know it's risky and deadly, I have no choice but to take off into the sky and try to find Dad or Tornado. If I find one, I'll find the other. The wagon soon gets enveloped in the smoke and I lose sight of Skullette. I remind myself to worry about it later. I need to find Dad.

Instead of finding Dad, I find an alley. One of the undercover Vikings. I swoop down close to him. The man rides a sturdy-looking donkey.

"Hey!" I call out, and he turns.

"Hiccup? Is that you?!"

"Where's my father?!"

"Down by Alvin's compound!"

"The prisoners! In the dungeon! They won't be able to escape without help. Can you-"

He turns his donkey toward the prison without waiting to hear the rest of my words.

I hurl Toothless higher to get to the compound. The northern roads are all impassable by horse-back. But I turn Toothless and head south. The ground shakes as the Whispering Death turns southwest and bellows, lashing at buildings with its tail.

It's official to say I've lost Skullette, but I finally manage to find Dad amongst the crowd and fire. I land Toothless a few feet away and run to him. He's taken shelter behind a fallen piece of the wall as men with crossbows fire continually. I take them all down with arrows and jump in front of Dad.

"Dad!" I scream.

"Hiccup!" he pulls me down and hugs me. But when he pulls away and sees my face he becomes horrified.

"I'm fine I just fell. Skullette's collecting villagers. We need to get them to the gates!" I say.

We take off on our dragons and head for the iron gates that have been blown to bits. The streets in front of us are clogged with wagons, people on donkeys or horses, or families hurrying toward the gates on foot. At our backs, a wall of impossible heat that precedes the flames that race toward us.

Toothless fires a plasma blast opening another hole for the villagers. People scream as tons of debris come raining down around them. They don't even question it. They begin to inch their way through the streets, surrounded by sobbing and screaming people and the thunderous roar of Outcast village succumbing to its fiery death in our wake.

Dragons are a black blur in the distance â€" twisting, lunging, and roaming their triumph as they consume the South Edge. A closer look reveals the dragons that must've gotten loose from the burning arena.

"Hiccup!" someone calls.

I turn and see Gobber running toward us, blood trickling down his bicep, but still alive. "Gobber!" when he gets to me I say, "Help these people out of here! I've got to find Alvin!"

He nods and Dad tells me, "Be careful." Before he goes and helps Gobber.

I leap on Toothless and we fly off. It's a sea of wreckage, blood and chaos. Beyond the ruins, the outside gleams like a jewel-green beacon of safety. The Whispering Death incarcerates the last block of buildings between it and the gates, then burrows down and leaves the city. The other dragons continue to set fire, as they have gone into a craze far beyond my ability to calm them.

They've gone rogue.

They just want to see everything burn. They'll destroy everything in sight. I need to find Skullette and get out of here. I don't care about Alvin anymore. I remember seeing Skullette's old wagon near the gate with people. She must've taken off and ran toward the compound since she knew that's where I would be heading. I descend on

Toothless and even when I hop off, he follows closely. I arrange my hood so it covers my face, grasping my bow close to my chest and survey the block.

There's only a handful of dazed-looking stragglers. I trail behind on hunter's feet, Toothless close by my side, bow loaded. Near the compound, people are milling around, wailing or just sitting there and letting the smoke cover them in soot. I begin to weave my way around the flames and people, across to the compound. Tripping over forgotten treasure and burned limbs. Most probably came here thinking they could seek refuge from their leader.

I can't seem to find her anywhere. Where is she? Suddenly someone screams, "The Vikings! The Vikings!"

I whirl around and look and see it was a woman, but she wasn't pointing at me. She was pointing to the sky. Dragons of all the species " Gronckle, Deadly Nadder, Monstrous Nightmare, Zippleback " fly in a "V" formation above the compound. There's at least three waves. Something's wrong. They're not supposed to be here, the ambush is over. What are they doing? Did Dad accidentally send them thinking I was already out? No, this isn't part of the plan. Not my plan.

This, is their own agenda.

Panic sets in and my drive to find Skullette increases. I begin to call out to her, headless of danger and my exposure. My momentum slams me into a flagpole and I cling to it. I don't know what's going on. I don't know what to do. But Toothless never leaves my side. I scan the area and see barrel upon barrel of the saliva piled high.

This is bad, and my body goes numb. I know because Toothless is the only thing that keeps me up. The dragons descend. In five seconds, the barrels all simultaneously explode. A wail rises from the crowd. A wail rises from the crowd. The ground's red and littered with body parts. Many die immediately, but others lie in agony on the ground. The barrels continue to explode left and right. Toothless suffocates me in his wings, and I've never been more reluctant for his fireproof skin.

But one explosion separates us and I fall, bouncing like a stone on a water's surface. Skidding across the dirt. My back, elbow and shoulder all experience the impact of the hard earth. Suddenly the roar increase and I hear the voices of multiple people calling me.

"Hiccup!"

"Hiccup!"

"Hiccup!"

I would reply, but somehow I've lost the ability to form words. Instead, I find another flagpole and cling to it for dear life as the world becomes nothing but fire and destruction. Suddenly a flock of people from my army power through the flames and debris and retrieve the people who manage to survive and haul them into the wagon that materializes from the smoke, with as much care as they can.

They swarm among the people, wielding swords to knock off concrete or rocks or even wood from them.

First I get a glimpse of the long back hair that reaches down her back. Then as she carries a wailing child in a dirty bed sheet, when she goes back, I see the blue of her outfit. And her pale skin glimmers in the flames. In the midst of red, orange, and yellow, I catch a glimpse of green. I must go limp because I find myself at the base of the flagpole.

She's been burned and cut all over her body. I see her lips, red as the inferno. A bow. A sheath.

And a hint of green.

The green that my eye could find anywhere, and through anything.

Even smoke.

Even fire.

Even chaos.

Suddenly I'm trying to remember how to breathe. I'm unable to speak. Totally stunned as the green flashes through my mind. I'm unable to account for the last few seconds, and I'm desperate clawing my way back up the pole. Trying to find use of my feet. Then I'm aggressively pushing through the crowd.

Trying to shout her name over the roar. I'm almost there. Almost there. When I think she hears me. Because for a moment, she catches sight of me.

Her emerald eyes gleaming with many emotions I can't decipher. I've lost that ability too.

Her beautiful lips form my name, and she extends a hand

A barrel explodes behind her.

And the flames swallow her whole.

### 33. Chapter 33

\_Hiccup!\_

Something's not right. I'm on fire. The balls of flame that erupted from the barrels shot through the constricting air and scattered everywhere. Draping over the crowd, caging them within. I was trying to run when on caught me. Ran its tongue up the back of my cape, and transformed me. But the last time I was set on fire, there was a tickling sensation.

There's no tickling.

I can't feel anything except for a single sensation: Agony. No sight, no sound, no feeling except for the unrelenting burning of my flesh.

The scales of flames that grow from my body. I want to shed this skin, relief the pain. But I can't do anything. I consume myself with no end. There might be periods of unconsciousness, but it doesn't matter if I can't find any refuge in them.

Not anymore.

It's like I'm trying to escape something inescapable. I'm running. I don't know where, but just away from here. I lift and I soar for a while. But too soon my wings begin to falter. Gravity intensifies, and I'm pulled down with extreme force.

Falling. Free falling. I plunge beneath the surface of an icy cold mud puddle the color of Astrid's eyes. With nothing to pull me back up, I plunge deeper beneath the surface. Everything continues to burn beneath the surface. A dark shadow looms over me, but I no longer feel the comfort it once provided.

Thankfully, the agony in me quiets the pain. I weakly open my eyes, and the fire turns the blue water into a red and orange blaze. Even with the water blurring my vision, I can see the ones I love fly above me as Night Furies. Soaring and weaving. Calling me to join them.

I want to so badly, but the mud saturates my wings. Making it impossible to lift them. The mud molds me together. Freezing me in my place. I'm adrift, unable to navigate and can't figure out where I am. That's when the dead come. The ones I hate come and attack me from the abyss. Hideous scaly fish that bite at my scorched body with needle teeth. Biting again and again.

Dragging me deeper. But I don't care anymore. There's nothing left for me above the surface. There's nothing left for me. Nothing.

Then suddenly, a pitch black Night Fury tinged in blue dives head first into the mud. Her speed amazes me, discarding the space between us like it's nothing. She sinks her claws into my chest and tries to pull me back to the surface. The horrible scaly things pull me back down, virtually ripping my body in half.

"\_No Hiccup! Don't look down!"\_

I close my eyes and scream at the pain. But it's severely muffled thanks to the mud.

"\_Don't look into the eyes of the world beneath you. Don't look down. You'll fall down. You'll become their sacrifice!"\_

But the ones I hate are winning. And if she holds on, she'll suffer with me. She'll be lost.

"Skullette let go!" I scream. And finally she does.

Once she flies away, the mud soon morphs into water. There's only the sound of my breathing. Deep in the water, I'm deserted by all. I can't even describe the enormous effort it takes to draw the water in, then push it out of my lungs. I want to stop. I try and hold my breath, hoping I'll find peace the same way I did before.

It never comes.

The water forces its way in and out of my lungs against my will.  
\_"Let me die. Let me follow the others."\_ I beg to whatever holds me here. I plead with Thor, Odin to drag me under. Heaven shine a light down on me. There's no response.

"\_I'm sorry."\_ I cry.

The shadow come closer and I want to flee, but I'm tired. I'm so tired. Trapped for days, months, years. Dead but not allowed to die. Alive but as good as dead. Way down. I've been way down underneath this skin. Just waiting to hear my name again. But way down, all the way down, I can hear her voice. But I no longer understand. I'm sorry.

I've never felt so alone in my life. So alone that anything, anyone no matter how loathsome would be welcome.

The water morphs into flames as I flashback to my battle with the Green Death. Flames surrounded me. All I remember was falling into the heat. Drifting down knowing it's all over. As the shadow finally comes close enough to finish me, I close my eyes and expect the worse.

It snatches me and I feel it pull me up. There's much pain but there's also something like reality. The sandpaper of my throat. The smell of antiseptic. The sound of my father's voice. These things scare me and I try to return to the deep to make sense of them. But I can't escape the shadow. I'm so afraid to open my eyes.

I was looking to the sky when I knew I'd be swimming home.

In the end, I know there's no going back. Gradually I'm forced to accept who I am as I brake the surface.

A badly burned boy. With no wings. With no fire.

And no Lover.

In the moss-draped cabin of the infirmary, Goathy works her magic on me. As best she can. I hear over and over again how lucky I am. Thanks to Toothless, my eyes and most of my face was spared by the flames. My lungs and throat are recovering well from the smoke. I'll be as good as new.

Goathy supplies me with a constant smooth flow of the drug she fed me the first time I was recovering from battle. It opens the door to my old and new repertoire of dreams. My mother cooks me all my favorite meals. Mulch brings me a cod fresh out of the sea. Hunter and Lucas tell me all about their target practice.

But the pain is just too real.

Skullette looks beautiful in her blue-shaded dress as we dance in the arena along the bank of painted wildflowers. She always captivated me by that resonating light she always had. There's just too much between us that time cannot erase.

She must still be here. The lavender scent of her hair and skin infects my nose. Her presence still lingers and it won't leave me

alone. Not that I want it to.

We've always been there for each other. When I'd cry she'd wipe away all of my tears. When she'd scream, I'd fight away her fears. And she held my hand through all those months. But it feels like she still holds half of what I am. She holds all of the pleasant things that I've lost, and without them, without her, I don't know.

I just. I don't know.

Her face used to hold my once pleasant dreams and her voice used to always chase away the insanity in me. But I feel so alone and I'm wondering why I feel this way. So many fears are swimming around and around in my mind.

One day I awake with expectations and know I won't be able to stay in my dream land. I must take food by the mouth. Move my own muscles. Make my way to the bathroom. It's the harsh smack on the face that reality gives me to realize I've been alone all along.

All just a dream in the end.

A brief appearance by my Dad clenches it.

"Don't worry," he says. "I saved him for you."

Goathy's puzzlement grows over why I'm completely unable to speak. Many inspections are done, and while there is slight smoke damage to my vocal chords, that doesn't account for it. Finally, Goathy comes up with a theory that I've become mentally, rather than physically mute. That my silence has been brought on by emotional trauma. Like the way I was when Mulch was murdered. Only now, it's worse.

Although she's presented a hundred possible remedies to cure me, she just tells everyone to leave me alone. So I don't ask about anything or anyone, but people bring me a steady stream of information.

On the war: The citizens were all brought back to Berk as refugees, and they've each been given a new home in some new buildings that were recently built. They're safe. They're completely clean. And they've been given new clothing. Any soldiers that were brought have become prisoners of war.

On Alvin: He's been held prisoner, awaiting trial and most certain execution.

On my team: Gobber, who took two arrows in combat, is in charge of Dragon Academy. At least until I feel I'm ready to go back. True was promoted to second in command next to Dad for squad control. Bucket's been doing better and I've been given permission to visit him when I please.

On my family: Dad's relieved I'm still alive.

On Skullette's family: Chief Boggs buries his grief in his work.

Having no work, the grief buries me. All that keeps me going is Dad's promise. That I can kill Alvin. And when that's done, nothing will be

left.

Eventually, I'm released from the infirmary after a few weeks and am allowed to walk freely among the village. Dad's almost never home. He's always at the Great Hall for discussions on Alvin's case and then coming home late at night. It falls on Gobber to check on me, make sure I'm eating and taking my medicine. It's not an easy job.

I begin to take on an unusual habit of seeking strange little hiding places. I wander anywhere in the village, completely unauthorized. My places are dim and quiet and impossible to find. A closet of furs. A cabinet in the library. Multiple crawlspaces throughout the village.

My places are dim and quiet and impossible to find. I curl up, make myself smaller, and try to disappear entirely. I still haven't found Skullette. I keep thinking she'll come and find me and make everything better. But she won't. She can't. Not anymore. I've tried so hard to tell myself that she's gone. But the mere thought pains my body to the core and I start shaking.

Wrapped in silence, I rock my prosthetic foot back and forth, the squeaking of it is strangely comforting. I fall into an insipid routine. I eat the food, take the medicine and am required to bathe. It's not the water I mind, but my reflection.

The parts of my body that were burned " both my forearms, the skin below my ribcage, my upper right thigh, my neck and my right shoulder " some retain newborn-baby pinkness. While others, the skin that deemed damaged but salvageable, look red, hot, and melted into place. Parts of my \_real\_ self, are pale white. I was never one to tan very easily.

I'm a bizarre patchwork quilt of skin.

I wouldn't care so much, but the sight of my body brings back the memory of the pain.

And why I was in pain.

And what happened before the pain started.

And how I watched my dearly beloved become a human torch.

Closing my eyes doesn't help. Fire burns brighter in the dark.

It's been a full month since the ambush. It just feels like days since I've been asleep and drugged for the whole time. But even so, I can still feel the flames of the fire tickling at my skin. Combined with the pain of the grief that I've lost, it's just too much. I can normally push her right out of my heart with the help of the drug. But I'm usually too tired to fight.

And the whole thing begins.

I let her sink into my veins. And every time, I feel the pain like it's new. Everything that we were, everything that she said, everything that we did and that I couldn't do plays through my mind. Her memory burns like a fire. And with every one, it grows higher and higher. I can't get over it. I can't put out this love.



So I just sit in the flames, and close my eyes tightly. I pray that she'll come back. Hold on and hope that I'm dreaming, and she'll come wake me up. The pain is worse than it ever was.

\_"Please,"\_ I whisper. \_"Please help me."\_ I plead. Tears sting my eyes and stream down my cheeks.

I know that she can't hear me, but I just need her to save me.

Late one afternoon, I've lost track of days. Why should I anymore? Until Alvin's trial is decided, there's no reason. I was walking toward the Dragon Academy. I'm not sure why, though. I guess it's because it's one of the few places I was once happy. Toothless comes through the gate and slowly walks up to me; as if he's afraid he'll spook me.

I turn to him and we stare at each other for long moments. Then I naturally hold out my hand, and he touches his nose to my palm. Just like he always does. I look back into the arena and see Gobber instructing Astrid, Fishlegs, Snotlout and the twins. Their dragons seated at their sides. Toothless takes a seat next to me as I observe.

Fishlegs is the first to notice me watching. He elbows Astrid and points in my direction. I don't move. She looks up and a smile comes on her face. I don't smile back. It goes away into a small upturn in the corners of her mouth. She gives me a wave, but I just stare. When I don't react, she just goes back to listening to Gobber.

I'm sure he knows I'm there, but after seeing Astrid's reactions, her know I'm not going to gesture to him either. So instead, I walk away and Toothless follows. I don't pet him, but he doesn't beg. He knows me better than anyone.

Even better than . . . her. I swallow an enormous lump that forms in my throat.

We wander into the woods and reach the Cove. This was where I had my first kiss with her. Where we would always fish. Where we would train. Where we had our first fight. But she's not here.

\_Where is she?\_ I ask in my head.

Toothless perks his ears and ruffs. As if he heard me. I look to him with pleading eyes. He nuzzles my cheek, but I turn away. I just stare at the glass-like surface of the water. Toothless comes behind me and nudges my hand. I look at him and he positions himself for me to mount. I look to him with hesitation and confusion. He just ruffs again, and I just mount.

For once, Toothless steers us to a secret path I've never noticed. I didn't even know it existed. He flies down at the edge of a clearing. Or once was a clearing. Now, nothing remains but a pile of scorched debris and a large soot circle. It's been like this forever. I've learned from past experience how to identify fresh and old burns.

I look around. Wondering why of all places Toothless would bring me here. We land in the shelter of the trees, and I hop off. I skid across moss as I reach an oak tree, and grab onto the trunk for

balance. I don't know what possessed me to move, but I leave the shelter of the trees; and walk toward the debris on shaking legs.

The soil beneath me turns to ash. Cold black flakes that cling to my boot as if trying to hold me back. Toothless calls to me. He's on the other side of the clearing. Perpendicular to where I'm standing. My boot grinds the sooty embers beneath me to dust as I cross the scorched ground. I follow Toothless. He occasionally looks back to see if I'm still following.

The foundation of trees is still there. Buried beneath the ash, a jumbled mound of scorched wood I have to climb up and over. My feet skid as I reach the top, sending me sliding down the other side. When I reach the bottom, I look up at Toothless, but stop when I catch the sight of something else.

Just beyond the edge of the destruction, where the ash bleeds gently into the soil again, a soft swell in the ground is marked by a small wooden cross painted white.

I can't breathe. My ears roar, and Toothless says something, but I can't understand the words because I'm walking toward the grave. Toothless steps to the side of the grave, and holds out his head to me. I hold onto it without thinking, but I can't feel him.

I can't even feel myself, and I don't want to. Let this be some other boy standing here, holding a dragon's head while the rest of this world comes crumbling down.

Please.

I move my hand away. The cross is beautifully carved and someone has painted the words \_Skullette\_ in the center. They forget to add \_Beloved Daughter and Friend\_ at the end.

Grief is a yawning pit of darkness blooming at my core. I can hardly stand beneath its weight. The sharp edges of Hunter's and Mulch's death collide with the unthinkable sight before me, and something inside me shatters as I fall to my knees.

I can't bear this. I can't.

The hope that flickered within me floats like ash into the darkness.

She's here, but not here.

I want to die too. Just stop breathing and hope I find her on the other side.

She's not here.

I sink down and lie on top of the dirt.

She's nowhere.

I'm bleeding inside where no one will see. Where no one will ever know to look.

She's gone.

She's \_gone\_.

### 34. Chapter 34

Voices float above me as I lie on the cold unyielding ground. I imagine sinking below it. Letting it take me under.

Finding peace.

The piercing pain of loss is a double-edged blade I can't bear to touch. How can I grieve for her? Cry for her? Bleed for her inside when it won't change anything?

It won't change anything.

She's \_gone.\_

All the words I never found time to say. All the things we never found time to do. Ripped from me wither merciless finality.

Gone.

But I'm not gone. I'm still here â€" miles from home, surrounded by scorched earth and a dragon, facedown on my lover's grave.

\_Here.\_

Somewhere inside I hear an anguished wailing â€" the wordless kneeling of unbearable grief. I can't stand to hear it. To feel it. To let it live.

A yawning darkness within me opens wide, whispering promises to take the pain. Swallow the loss. Make it possible to draw a breath without choking on the shattered pieces no one will ever fix.

I dig my fingers into her grave and flinch as the images of Skullette and Mulch sear themselves into my brain. I will choke on the grief. Lie here impotent, unable to avenge them. Loss is a gaping hole with jagged teeth, and I can't \_bear\_ it.

I push the images away, scramble back from the edge of that gaping hole, and let the darkness within me swallow it all. The wail of grief inside me slowly subsides into a well of icy silence â€" deafening and absolute. The silence rips me in two, cutting me from everything I can't stand to face. I don't try to stop it. If I feel the loss, it will break me.

And I can't break until Alvin is dead.

Because Skullette is gone. And I'm still here.

And before I follow her, I have a debt to pay.

My fingers clench into fists, my nails breaking as I shove them through the hard-packed dirt. Fury is a welcome companion, warming me

with something that almost feels like comfort.

It's Alvin's fault Skullette was even brought to Berk in the first place. His fault I'll never see Mulch again. His fault I languished in a dungeon.

His fault Skullette is dead.

I owe him for all of it.

I can't find my grief for Mulch. My fear for my Dad. My agony over losing Skullette forever. I can't, and I don't care.

Feeling nothing but rage and resolve makes me stronger. And soon, Alvin will realize just how strong he's made me.

My fingers ache with stiffness. I've been lying face-first on Skullette's grave for hours, clutching fistfuls of dirt as if by touching what covers her now, I can somehow touch her.

At some point, I realize that Dad has arrived. Probably to see where I've been. Astrid joins him. I don't greet them. Toothless is sitting quietly beside me as if to let me know I'm not alone.

He's wrong.

I've never been more alone.

It grows colder without her love.

I turn my face to look at him and realize darkness is falling, obscuring the tree line and hiding the ugly remains of the trees that were burned. Everything is burned. Toothless lays down, scorching the earth beneath him before settling. His dark eyes seem to penetrate the emptiness inside me with something that looks like regret.

He can keep his regret. His sympathy. His quiet understanding.

I don't want it.

I don't need it.

All I need is Alvin's blood on my hands.

I'm still staring at him, and he slowly moves as scuffed boot enters my field of vision. Then they bend to a knee, and Astrid's face comes into view. She slowly offers me her hand as if afraid I'll shy away at any sudden movements.

"We made you dinner, Hiccup." She says as if this should make sense to me.

I ignore her hand. I'm not hungry.

"Come on, Hiccup." She turns to look over her shoulder. I follow her line of sight and see my father over a pot on a small fire. Gobber hunches down on the opposite side of the pot, watching me. "We made stew."

Doesn't she know I don't care? I turn my face away, letting the

ground scrape against my cheek. The pain feels good. Real. A tiny piece of what I should be feeling but can't now that the silence inside me has swallowed everything but rage.

"Please."

I can't make small talk. If I open my mouth now, all the hate and fury bubbling just below the surface will spill out and consume her.

Her voice is husky with something that sounds like grief. "She was a brave warrior. I'm very sorry. Really, I am."

I look at her eyes. They're a baby-blue green, opposite of emerald green. And I'm suddenly, illogically angry at Astrid when I remember about her pity competition with Skullette for my attention.

And at Toothless for giving me something as cruel as hope of finding her here. Alive.

"Hiccup, you can't stay here." Astrid is still speaking, though I show no indication of listening.

I can't leave. What will be left to me if I walk away from this spot?

I hear footsteps walking toward the grave, but I still don't move. My father. He kneels down and leans forward. His eyes looking so much older than the rest of him. "I'm so sorry, Hiccup. I wish you had more time, but you don't if you get caught, everything Skullette did o keep you safe will be in vain."

His words find their mark. If I don't move, Skullette dies for nothing, and I lose my leverage against the man I hold responsible. Besides, if anyone can match the grief I feel over my loss, it's my father.

I sit up slowly, still clutching fistfuls of grave dirt. I can't bear to let it go.

Astrid looks at my hands, a tiny frown creasing the skin between her eyes, and then digs into the front pocket of her skirt she always wears. "Here." Stretching out her hand, she offers me a small pouch.

I take it. The dirt slides into the pouch with a whisper of sound, and I pull it closed. The strings are long enough to tie behind my neck. I knot them securely and let the final piece of Skullette rest over my heart.

"Come eat. You'll need your strength." He says.

He's right. I can't kill Alvin on an empty stomach. I stand and follow him to where Gobber is now using dirt to smother her cooking fire before the flames catch the rest of the trees.

My body moves like it always has. My feet follow one after the other. My nostrils capture the scent of wood smoke and fish stew, and my ears note the creaking of branches and the crunch of ash-coated debris beneath me. But it's all meaningless. I'm a stranger beneath

my skin. I wear armor on the inside, a metal forged of fury and silence, cutting me off from myself.

I'm no longer a son.

No longer a friend.

No longer a boy with dreams. With hope.

I'm purely a weapon, now.

Skullette did not die in vain. I'm going to make sure of it.

I embrace my rage. Let it sink into my secret spaces and make me its own as I sit down beside the ruins of the fire, and accept a bowl of stew. It tastes like ashes in my mouth, but I chew with dogged determination. It takes everything I have to force myself to swallow when I'd rather gag, but I do it.

Revenge takes energy.

Now I'm anticipating the execution of Alvin. So that I can finally avenge all of those who've died trying to keep me alive. The boy everyone once knew is now gone. He was lost the minute blood blossoms began to bloom on Mulch's skin.

The rage within me is viciously triumphant.

After finishing the tasteless meal, I grab my knife and I leave everyone as I settle back down next to Skullette's grave. Leaving Gobber to keep the first watch, I unroll my blanket over Skullette's grave and lie down with my face beside the carved wooden cross.

Moonlight gleams on its surface, gilding her name in beauty that should warm me. I reach out and grasp the wood with my bare hand, holding it tight as splinters gouge my palm. It's a welcome pain, but it isn't enough to relieve the silent weight crushing me from within. Letting go, I turn my face away from the cross, away from Dad, away from everyone, and close my eyes.

The wind sighs along the treetops and whispers over my skin like a lullaby, but I can't sleep. Soon, I'll have justice. A life for a life. It won't be enough to seal up the edges of everything that's undone within me. It won't be enough to shatter the silence and let me grieve in peace.

It won't be enough, but it's all I have, and I cling to it with desperate strength.

The wind dies down, and I hear a soft crunch on ash behind me. Tensing, I try to listen for it again, but I can't hear anything beyond the sudden roar of my pulse pounding inside my head.

My knife slides free of its sheath without a sound. I brace myself on my left elbow beneath me, flip the knife blade-side out, and shove off the ground.

Savage stands two yards from me, his knife down at his side, his eyes pits of rage and misery. He means to destroy me. Destroy any chance

of justice. Make Skullette's sacrifice worth nothing.

I raise my weapon. I snarl at him. If I were to speak, I'm sure I'd be in a voice not even I would recognize. Cold. Empty.

"You said you'd give refuge to those who lost their homes." His voice is cold and empty.

I don't say anything.

His face contorts, his body shakes, his legs tense.

I use my eyes for communication, and they scream, "Get. Back."

He watches me, his knife hand trembling so badly that he'll never be able to stab me with it before I disarm him, tie him up, and leave him for Dad and Gobber to deal with. Rolling to the balls of my feet, I lunge for his right arm.

His left flashes out, silver streaking through the moonlight, and I remember his ambidextrous sword work a millisecond before he can slice into me. Spinning to the side, I drop and roll forward, coming up several yards away.

He's trying to kill me.

I crouch, blade out. Something feral tears through me, obliterating Astrid, Dad, the kind of boy I once dreamed I'd be, and every cautious word Skullette ever spoke, leaving nothing but pure, scorching bloodlust in their wake.

Savage swings his sword in dizzying circles and rushes at me. I wait until he's almost at me, and then dive forward, low to the ground, crashing into his legs and sending him flying over the top of me. His blade nicks me as it goes by, but I can't feel the pain, and he drops his sword as he lands on his side.

"Hiccup!" my Dad calls.

I'm screaming now. Raw, agonized wails that flay the air with their fury. Out of the corner of my eye I see Dad and Gobber hurrying toward us, but I have no time for them. Whirling, I lunge forward while Savage is still reaching for his sword. He sees me and slashes out with his knife instead. The blade catches my cloak and tears into it, but I don't slow down.

I can't.

Driving my boot into his wrist, I grind the small bones together. He yells and drops his knife.

I slam my knees onto his diaphragm and feel the air leave his lungs. He whips his left arm up and punches me in the face, and I land in a pile of ash on my back. He's already on his feet. Already coming for me. I can't see his weapons. I don't know which hand he'll use. And I don't have time to get up.

He's in the air, long legs dropping down, his face a mask of murderous intent.

I broke his right wrist. The weapon must be in his left hand. I roll to his right as he lands beside me, his left arm already swinging forward. Flipping my blade around, I push myself off the ground and bury my knife deep into his chest.

He sags, deflating slowly onto the ash beside me, and reaches for the knife with his empty left hand.

He isn't holding his sword. I scan the area and see it gleaming yards away from us. His knife lies beside it.

"I wanted to give it to you." His eyes stare at me like a child trying to understand what he'd done wrong. "That's all."

\_You tried to kill me!\_ I scream through my eyes.

He was. I know it. I had to have known it. He's Alvin's most loyal soldier. He'd do anything for Alvin as long as he got rewarded in the end. I didn't just fatally wound an unarmed man who wanted nothing more than to give me a simple gift.

His blood seeps along the knife hilt, thick and warm, and coats my hands.

\_You tried to kill me\_ I talk through my eyes.

"I wanted to wake you carefully. I know you're in such a fragile state. And I expected a defense mechanism." He coughs, a horrible wet sound that sprays me with blood. "I just wanted to give you his old sword. To kill him with at the execution."

\_No. no. \_I pull the knife free as he slides to the ground. \_No\_

My hands can't stop the bleeding, but I try. Pressing against his wound, I try to make sense of him. Of myself. Of what we've done.

What I've done.

Dad and Gobber rush behind me and I hear the soft footprints of Astrid too. Gobber doesn't push me aside, instead he kneels down. He knows the wound is beyond his skill of healing. And we can't get him back to the village in time.

Besides, I've learned from past training that when a pool of blood reaches a certain size, there's no point. He raises a hand, long fingers gleaming white in the moonlight. "Hiccup?"

I can't look at him. I can't.

"Alvin, not responsible." His voice is nothing but a whisper straining against the blood filling up his throat.

I can barely speak past the suffocating guilt choking me. I \_killed\_ him. A desperate man. A pawn of Alvin who would do anything he wanted. But who wanted nothing more than to be free from his clutches.

I can't break the silence. It's breaking me.



He doesn't speak again, and I cover his wound with my bloodstained hands until his chest falls silent.

### 35. Chapter 35

I sit by Savage's body until dawn bleeds across the sky. Astrid sits with me while Dad packs everything together. Gobber's on guard somewhere in the shade of the trees.

I didn't ask Astrid to sit with me. But somehow having her there, quietly present without offering judgment, makes the ragged edges in me settle just a bit. The gloom lifts around us. I don't want to breathe anymore. I don't want to feel anymore.

There's a vicious longing in me that wants nothing more than to lie down. Lie cold in the ground. Although I may have lost my way, all paths lead straight to Skullette. How I long to be like Skullette. Lie cold in the ground like Skullette. There's room inside for two.

I let inside the loneliness. I want to stay in love with my sorrow. Here in the darkness, I know myself. Always find my place among the ashes.

Dad had explained everything to me throughout the night. Periodically pausing to make sure I'm listening. Savage had surprisingly turned over a new leaf. All those threats he made, all of those attacks, threatening Heather. All he did to save his own life. While it may appear selfish, Savage had no one else in his life. No wife, no child. No family. So it's understandable.

But I don't want to understand it. I don't if I do, the guilt will only eat me alive.

Dad explains that Savage was going to give me Alvin's old, but prized sword. So that I can kill him with his most prized possession for the execution. Dad and Gobber didn't know he would come here, but they meant to tell me when I was ready. But they've waited too late.

Now, I'm looking back and remembering I jumped up from my blanket with my knife already raised for battle while his was still trained at the ground. I lunged at him, blade out, before he even raised his sword.

He was trying to disarm me and defend himself. I killed him.

I struggle to my feet and run to the edge of the trees, where I fall to my knee and retch.

I killed him.

My stomach is empty.

I killed him.

I'm shaking, my teeth chattering against each other violently when Astrid's solid arms wrap around me from behind and hold me against her warm chest.

"You thought you were defending yourself."

I did think that, but it doesn't comfort me now.

"It happened fast. Did you make the best decision you could given the information?"

I twist around to look at her, her warm blue eyes steady on mine, her braided blonde hair haloed by the early morning light.

I know Astrid will try to take away my pain. And she just might make me smile. But the whole time, I'm wishing it was Skullette instead.

I can't believe how lost I've gotten without her. And in such a short amount of time. I hate feeling like this. Feeling totally lost. So tired of trying to fight it. All I dream of is waking to her. I miss her touch.

I don't want to live, I don't want to breathe, unless I feel her warmth next to me. She always takes the pain I feel. Her touch used to be so kind. It used to give me life. My dreams can't comfort me the way she makes me feel. I hate living without her.

In my gaping hole of grief, the demons lay in waiting. Tempting me away. The sorrow takes ahold. The icy silence feels colder. I never want it to be so cold. So alone. I can barely see it all.

The silence in me grows and I can feel myself falling in its blackness. Slipping through the cracks. Falling to the depths. Dreaming of the way it used to be.

Can I ever go back? No one can hear me scream from the abyss. There are only whispers in the dark.

She was my source of strength.

All the things she said, they keep running through my head. Being with her has opened my eyes. I keep closing them but I can't block her out.

I want to fly to a place where it's just me and her. Nobody else, so we can be free.

I can try to pretend.

I can try to forget.

But it's driving me mad. I'm going out of my head.

I look up and see my father standing behind Astrid.

\_Tell me father, what do you see? Yes, I've lost my mind. Will I ever be free?\_

The brief sense of home I had with Skullette is gone. I look away. I don't want their absolution.

"We're not offering any absolution, Hiccup." Astrid says. "Take the blame that belongs to you, and nothing else. I'm asking you to look

it in the eyes and face it for what it is."

But I can't face it. Not really. If I do, if I let it cut me like I deserve, everything else will spill out too. Mulch. Skullette. Savage. It's all one big gaping pit of loss, destruction, and grief, and I feel it, I'll never be able to deliver judgment.

I don't even have to ask the silence to take it from me. It's already gone. Slipping into the emptiness before I make the conscious choice to send it there, and leaving me numb.

I push away from Astrid, and she lets me. Why shouldn't she? I mean nothing to her. I'm just a broken boy who's lost his lover and then killed a man. And I'm about to go kill another.

Gathering my belongings, I stow them away in my pack that Dad brought along. Gobber, Astrid and the others pack their things too. I look over and still see Savage's body. I can't abandon him for the forest animals to eat. Leaving my pack beside Skullette's grave, I use my knife and start digging a new one a few yards away. Soon, Dad and everyone drop down beside me and dig as well.

I don't want their help. I catch Dad's wrist in my hand and stop him. He looks at me in confusion.

"We can help, Hiccup. It'll get done much faster," Gobber says, but Dad lays a hand on his arm, and they pull everyone back.

I need to do this for Savage. Alone. A piece of atonement in the lifetime of penance I'm going to serve for my crime.

It takes me almost an hour. I use my knife and then scoop dirt out with my bare hands, letting the dust of his grave mingle with the stains of blood on my skin. Then Dad and Gobber help me lift him and lay him gently down. When Gobber picks up his sword to lay across his chest, I hold out my hand for it.

A reminder of what I'm capable of.

It's too long and heavy for me to carry all the way back to the village.

Afterwards, together we push the soil back into place until all that remains is a little hill of dirt. Astrid stands beside me, a solid, reassuring presence I refuse to lean on. Gobber stands adjacent to us, scanning the tree line surrounding us.

I should say something. A eulogy. A goodbye. But Savage deserves to be memorialized by someone other than the boy who took his life, and I don't know how to put it in words the cost of what I've done.

I turn away. I have a mission to complete. When it's over, I'll look for absolution. When it's over, I'll find what comfort is left to me.

I refuse to brush the dirt from my hands. Dad scoops up my pack and Alvin's sword, and I walk over to Toothless. As I mount, out of the corner of my eye, I see Snotlout, looking at me. Studying me. Shock punches a little frisson of panic through him. I try to picture myself without looking in the reflective surface of Gobber's

shield.

My pale skin is smudged with ash. My cloak is torn and battered. And my hands. My hands are covered in dirt and dry blood, and now I'm clutching my enemy's sword like it's going to disappear if I let go.

But what probably the worst is my face. Cold. Fierce. Empty. Like someone snuffed out the Hiccup everyone knew and sent out a hollow shell in his place. I break our eye contact and we fly off back to the village.

Upon arrival, I'm instructed to go to Goathy's for my medicine. I'm glad. I need it. To help me escape the cruelty of this world. And take me somewhere where I'm not covered in someone's blood. Even though she can't vocally talk, I've been with her long enough to translate her writings without Gobber's assistance. She's glad too.

She thinks he's a bad translator.

I like her because apart from healing me and nursing me, she doesn't say stupid things like how I'm totally safe, or that she knows I can't see it, but I'll be happy again one day, or even that things will be better on Berk now.

But I can't help but feel that she's suspicious of me. She thinks I'm becoming addicted to the drug she feeds me. And not in the sense that it's for the pain, but for abuse. And it's true. It's not like I'm desperate for it, but I just need it sometimes to help myself erase the pain of both my grief and my sore muscles. But she's starting to be careful of how much she gives me. Not only for my own good, but I've seen some people get hooked on Goathy's drugs. And it's not pretty. They suffer horrible withdrawal. And she doesn't want me to be like that.

She's probably the closest thing to a grandmother I've ever had.

She tells me that today she'll give me enough to subdue the pain, but I can still walk around the village. But I don't know if it's a good idea. I tend to get hallucinations when I'm on the drug. I remember while I was in recovery from combat, I had horrible dreams. One being that the entire floor of my bedroom was littered with Fireworm Dragons.

Before everything, I was trying so hard to escape that drug-induced dreamland of mine. But now, it's all that I want.

It's the only way I can see her.

After I swallow the metal tasting liquid, I immediately leave as the effects take hold. I decide to head to my little room in the back of the blacksmith's shop. At least there I can have quiet.

I doze off a few minutes after I sit down. Images of the real world intertwine with mirages that the drug provides. I'm flying through the village, over the vast sea and see Mulch and Bucket gathering a fishing net in their boat. Filled with salmon, and some nice Islanded cod. My mother sits in her rocking chair on our porch, reading the Book of Dragons.

Over in the Plaza, people mingle and dragons help pull large wheelbarrows full of sacks of grain, fly above carrying boulders overhead. People wave and I see a blue Monstrous Nightmare fly with Hookfang.

In the woods, Astrid chucks axes at trees, Fishlegs is taking notes on the flora and the fauna. And I see her. I never expected to see her, even in my dreams. I don't question it. I fall the ground, then push myself up and sprint towards her not even caring.

She stands perfectly poised in blue. Her glorious hair, pitch-black from the scales of a Night Fury. My bloodstained hands hover over her beautiful face, afraid to touch her. Afraid to touch her with something so gruesome. Her green eyes wounded. I want to hold her until some of my pain recedes. She lifts her hand and presses it against my cheek. I tremble.

"Skullette." I lay a hand on her shoulder as if to make sure she's real.

"I told you I'd find you."

Her fingers clench around my shoulder, and she slowly curls toward me until she's lying face down against my chest. Her weight hurts, but I don't complain. Instead, I cradle her to me and feel the missing pieces inside of me slide firmly into place.

I can't believe how real she feels. I listen to her breathe, and I shake like I've been caught in a snowstorm with nothing but a tunic. She feels so . . . alive. Warm and steady in my arms.

And yet, with Savages blood still on my hands, I'm not convinced. I try not to hold onto it since I'll just be disappointed in the end. The silence inside consumes me. I want to burrow into her and feel safe. Feel the grief, and anger, and most important the hope that I know hovers somewhere just out of reach within me.

Digging my fingers into her shoulder, I desperately try to feel \_real \_again. The world becomes gauzy, violet-tinted.

\_I love you. Always.\_

"\_Always."\_

In the twilight, she whispers the words to me. Suddenly she disappears. Her mage blows away like the ashes from the clearing. I push through cloud banks, follow faint tracks, and catch the scent of lavender. Once I feel her hand on my cheek, I try to trap it, but it dissolves like mist through my fingers.

When I finally begin to surface into the dull, candlelight room of the blacksmith's shop, I remember. All too well. I remember the word Skullette whispered to me before we flew off. Her soft feminine voice. Whispering gently in my ear. I let it swim up through my dreams to taunt me now. "\_Always."\_

The drug dulls the extremes of all emotions, so instead of a stab of sorrow, I merely feel emptiness. A hollow of dead brush where flowers used to bloom. Unfortunately, there's not enough of the drug left in

my veins for me to ignore the pain in my body. I wake feeling sadder and lonelier than ever.

I leave the shop, dragging my feet across the dirt. The squeaking of my prosthetic foot echoes through the village. The time draws near, although I can't give exact hours and minutes. Alvin's been tried and found guilty, sentenced to execution. Dad tells me, I hear talk of it as I drift past some Vikings in the village.

My Dragon Conqueror suit arrives in my room. Also my bow, looking no worse for wear, but no sheath of arrows. Either because they were damaged or more likely because I shouldn't have weapons. I vaguely wonder if I should be preparing for the event in some way, but nothing comes to mind.

I've been visiting Bucket recently, and he's in worse shape than I imagined. Guards were bordering the animal farm where Bucket likes to spend most of his time. I was a little leery about visiting him since everybody thinks he's mad. The last I heard about him was that he was allowed to feed himself some fish stew.

On the first visit, I decide he's less mad than unstable. He laughs at odd places in the conversation or drops out of it distractedly. Those blue eyes fixate on a point with such intensity that you find yourself trying to make out what he sees in the empty air. Sometimes for no reason, he presses both hands over his ears as if to block out a painful sound.

Sometimes we even just stare at the horizon together. No talking. Which is fine with the both of us. He's strange, but he was Mulch's best friend. And when you lose that, what else can you do? And I've made it a goal to help him get back as best as I can.

But deep down, I know he'll never be the same. Grief is something that scars us all. On our bodies. On our minds. And our emotions.

But I allow myself to feel a small glimmer of hope one day when he speaks one day during my visit. I had been visiting him daily for three weeks. Bringing him different flowers for him to collect, and also packing along the Book of Dragons something for me to work on while he just stares at the sunsets.

I was starting to think he was totally lost, but I made myself swear I would wait for him. The real Bucket is still in there. And I was going to wait until he came out. I was about halfway through the Book of Dragons at the time. And I had just finished reading about how Changewing's skin is softer due to its ability to change color and texture.

When I heard it.

"Hey Hiccup."

My head snapped up and Bucket was still staring unblinkingly ahead. But it was his voice. I know it. And a look at the guards confirmed my guess. They had shock and surprise all over their faces. He spoke. Bucket spoke. It was overwhelming.

But it wasn't enough to crack the silence within me.

Late one afternoon, after a long period in a cushioned seat, I emerge and turn left instead of right. I find myself in a strange part of the village, and immediately lose my bearings. Unlike my area of the infirmary, there seems to be no one around to ask. I like it, though. Wish I'd found it sooner. It's so quiet.

Thick rugs and heavy tapestries soaking up the sound. Softly lit. Muted colors. Peaceful.

As I creep down a nature alleyway, I catch the scent of roses. So pure. I turn a corner and find myself staring at two surprised guards posted in front of a greenhouse. Not Outcasts of course. These two, a man and a woman, wear the tattered clothing of pure Vikings.

Still bandaged and gaunt, they are now keeping watch over the doorway to the greenhouse. When I move to enter, their spears form an X in front of me.

"You can't go in, sir." Says the man.

"Soldier," the woman corrects him. "You can't go in, Soldier Hiccup. Your father's orders."

I just stand there patiently waiting for them to lower their spears, for them to understand, without my telling them, that behind those doors is something I need. Just lavender. A single bloom. To pin to my chest, just over my heart, so that Skullette will be there to witness the death of Alvin with me. My presence seems to worry the guards. They're discussing on calling my father when a man speaks up behind me. "Let him go in."

I know the voice, but I can't immediately place it. I turn my head and find myself face-to-face with Chief Boggs. He looks even more beat up than he did in the Outcast capitol. The sight of him fills me with relief and agony.

"On my authority," says Chief Boggs. "He has a right to anything behind that door." These are his soldiers, not my father's. They drop their weapons without question and let me pass. With two steps past them, I push apart the thick wooden doors and step inside.

By now the smell of the floral is so strong, it flattens out. As is there's no more my nose can absorb. The damp mild air feels good on my hot skin. And the flowers are glorious. Row after row of sumptuous blooms, in lush pink, sunset orange, and even pale blue. I wander through the aisles of carefully pruned plants, looking and occasionally touching the soft petals between my fingers.

I soon find it, crowning the top of a slender shrub. A magnificent violet stem that just opened its petals. I roll up the sleeves of my green tunic, take a pair of gardening shears, and have just positioned them on the stem when he speaks.

"That's a nice one."

My hand jerks, the shears snap shut, severing the stem.

"The colors are lovely of course, but nothing says happiness like purple."

I still can't see him, but his voice seems to rise up from an adjacent bed of crimson roses. Crimson. Delicately pinching the stem of the lavender, and holding it close to my heart, I find the courage to slowly move around the corner and find him sitting on a stool against the wall. He's immensely weighed down chain cuffs, ankle shackles, ball and chains, manacles. In the bright light, his skin's a pale almost sickly green. His spiked armguards are spotted with fresh blood. Even in his deteriorated state, his murderous eyes shine bright and cold.

This is why the guards halted me. This is why Chief Boggs let me in.

"I was hoping I'd see you in my quarters." He hisses.

I supposed he'd be secured in the deepest dungeon that Berk had to offer, not cradled in the lap of daylight. And yet dad left him here.

I look behind him and see multiple bushes of lavenders. This is an unusual way to treat prisoners of war. I guess Dad thought that by having him smell the scent that reminds me of my lost lover will torture him with guilt. But it's pointless. The man's a sociopath. He'll never feel guilty. And he'll never feel sorry.

"There are so many things we should discuss, but I have a feeling your visit will be brief. So, first things first." He begins to cough, and when he removes his spiked armguard, it's redder. "I wanted to tell you how very sorry I am about you girlfriend."

Even in my deadened, drugged condition, this sends a stab of pain through me. Reminding me that there are no limits to his cruelty. And how he will go to his grave trying to destroy me.

"So wasteful, so unnecessary. Anyone could see the game was over by that point. In fact, I was just about to issue an official surrender when he released those dragons." His eyes are glued on me, unblinking, so as not to miss a second of my reaction. But what he said makes no sense. When he released the dragons?

"Well, you really don't think I gave the order, did you? Forget the obvious fact that we didn't even get a day's worth of your skill to controlling my dragons. But that aside, what purpose would it have served? We both know I'm not above killing my own people and soldiers, but I'm not wasteful. I take life for special reasons. And there was no reason for me to destroy a pen full of Outcast citizens. None at all."

I wonder if the next fit of coughing is staged so that I can have time to absorb his words. He's lying. Of course he's lying. But there's still something struggling to free itself from the lie as well.

"However, I must concede it was a masterful move on Mildew's part. The idea that I was bombing own helpless citizens instantly snapped whatever frail allegiance my people still felt to me. There was no real resistance after that." Alvin wipes the corners of his mouth "I'm sure he wasn't gunning for you girlfriend, but these things happen."



I'm not with Alvin now. I'm back in Tower 3, where my Outcast ally handed me my arrowhead seconds before he took his last breath. Blood splattered on his uniform. Bubbling on his lips. Remembering his words.

"\_Take it. This'll shoot him down. Aim for the heart. Don't trust him. Do what you came to do."\_

"My failure," says Alvin. "was being too slow to grasp that old man's plan. To let the dragons destroy everyone. Both Outcast and Vikings. And then step up to prove the true evil behind the beasts. Make no mistake, he was intending it from the beginning. I shouldn't be surprised. I should've known that he branded me as an enemy the minute he knew I wanted to \_control\_ dragons rather than eliminate them. But I wasn't watching Mildew. I was watching you, Dragon Conqueror. And you were watching me. I'm afraid we've both been played for fools."

I refuse for this to be true. Some things even I can't survive.

I utter my first official words since Skullette's death.

"I don't believe you."

Alvin shakes his head and chuckles in mock disappointment. "Oh Hiccup. I thought you were a smart boy."

## 36. Chapter 36

Outside, I find Chief Boggs in the exact same spot. "Did you find what you were looking for?" he asks.

I hold up the purple bud in answer and then stumble past him. I must have made it back to my room, because the next thing I know, I'm filling a mug with water from the tub and sticking the lavender in it. I sink to my knees on the cold, splintery wood and squint at the flower, as the purple seems hard to focus on in the stark fluorescent light.

My fingers interlace with the strings on my sleeves and I pull them tight. Twisting like a tourniquet, hurting my right forearm. I'm hoping the pain will help me hang on to reality. I must hang on. I must know the truth about what has happened.

There are two possibilities, although the details associated with them vary. First, as I've believed, that Alvin has sent the armada of dragons, ignited the barrels and sacrificed his citizens lives, knowing the Vikings would go to their aid. There's evidence to support this. Alvin's compound was the last to burn from within the city. It's possible he just let the dragons free, assuming they'd be too crazed to stop burning the city to the ground.

Then there's Alvin's account. That the dragons were sent by someone on my own team. My own side. That they sent them out to bomb the citizens to bring a speedy end to the war. But if that's the case, why were the Vikings working so desperately to evacuate the citizens? And why was my father and everyone else running in a blind panic to find me if it was part of their plan? Did the element of surprise

throw them? And why would they do it knowing their own men would break through the haze just to save the enemy people?

They wouldn't.

They couldn't.

Alvin's lying.

Manipulating me as he always has. Hoping to turn me against my own people and possibly destroy them. Yes. Of course.

Then what's nagging at me? Those double-exploding barrels for one. Then there's the fact that Alvin made no escape attempt, when I know him enough to be the consummate survivor. It seems hard to believe that he didn't have a retreat somewhere, some bunker stocked with provisions where he could live out the rest of his snaky little life.

And finally there's his assessment on Mildew. What's irrefutable is that he's done exactly what Alvin said. Let the Vikings and Outcasts run each other into the ground and then sauntered up to blame the dragons like he always would. Even if it was his plan, it doesn't mean he's the one who sent the dragons in. Victory was already in our grasp.

Except me.

I recall the unknown Outcast ally when I was watching him die. And my own thoughts. I'm the face of the rebellion. I have more influence than any other single person. Any words that come out of my mouth practically turns to gold. Could that be it? Did Mildew send the dragons into the city and have them destroy everything just to show me that they're nothing but destructive animals? So that if I were to say get rid of them, no one would question me?

Suddenly, I'm thinking of Savage. Who perished at the hilt of my knife. He said, \_"Alvin, not responsible."\_ Did he mean he wasn't responsible for the death of Skullette like I had assumed? If I were to look at it from a different perspective, it would appear that the dragons' fire ignited the barrels therefore causing the explosion and death. Thereby making them the reason why Skullette's dead.

Making them appear wild. Feral. Mad. Branding them as psychotic.

Un-trainable.

Did Mildew really do it, hoping that losing Skullette would push me over the edge? Or, at least firmly on his side? The side saying that dragons are monsters and nothing more, and never will be anything more. I wouldn't even have had to witness the thing in person. Just looking at the Chief Boggs alone would be enough.

No, now I am going crazy, slipping into some state of hysteria. Too many people would've known about it. Word would get out. Or would it? Who would've known besides Mildew? No one like him, let alone trusts him. He could've kept the whole thing to himself. Making it easier.

I badly need to work this out, only everyone I trust is dead. Mulch. Hunter. Skullette. There's Bucket, but he couldn't do more than speculate, and who knows what state of mind he's in anyway. My father's out of the question. Now that Alvin's case has been decided, he's too caught up in his own agenda. Plus I don't want to stress his any further; especially after the Savage incident.

I refuse to talk with Astrid simply because I'm stuck on the illogical idea that she's trying to win my affection now that Skullette's out of the picture. It's unfair, I know and I have no right to wrongfully accuse her of such an idea. But the nagging inside me refuses to let the idea slip into the silence. So I let it settle.

That leaves only Toothless. It's not like it'll be unusual for me to talk to him. I have in the past. And he seems to really listen. But could I confide in him? What could I say, how could I phrase it, without implying that it was his fire that killed Skullette? The impossibility of that idea, more than nay, is why Alvin must be lying.

Ultimately, there's only one other person to turn to who might know what happened and might still be on my side. To broach the subject at all will be a risk. But while I know Gobber to be insensitive, he tells the truth. Even if it hurts. We prefer resolving our problems one-on-one.

I scramble off the wood, out the door, and across the Town Square. The windows of the blacksmith's shop are closed, but I know Gobber's not at the Great Hall. So I push inside. The embers that remain in the pit after a long day of work, still give off a warm glow. But the warmth never reaches my skin.

I look all around and the place is quiet. Even the candlelight in the back room is blown out. I crawl up the wooden staircase into Gobber's home. I don't expect the place to be tidy. No Viking ever is. And when I reach the top, I'm surprised to find the smell of rosemary perfuming the air.

While there are scattered pieces of clothing on the floor, the place seems in decent shape. I'm still in the living room/kitchen, much like my house, and I have to climb another flight to reach his bedroom. He's in a tangle of sheets on the bed, passed out.

"Gobber." I say, shaking his leg. Of course, that's insufficient. But I still give a few more tries before I resort to Astrid's technique.

I slam my foot into his side and he fumbles off the bed and onto the floor with a thud. He wakes with a gasp and is slashing the air with his knife. I almost forgot he sleeps with one.

He looks to me and seems relatively calm, even pleased to see me. "Oh, hey Hiccup." He says.

"Gobber," I begin.

He looks to me in disbelief and smiles. Strangely it's warm, genuine. But it never breaches. "Well, listen to that. The mighty warrior has

found his voice." He says, happiness in his voice. "Your father will be very happy."

"I need your help." I say.

When he agrees, I leave him to change. We walk through the village and I keep my speaking to a minimum. But strangely Gobber seems to understand. He tells me that Mildew hasn't done much to his knowledge, which isn't very helpful. Knowing Mildew, he's probably been scheming the whole time since I joined the war.

Gobber tells me that there were situations involving him while I was stowed away in Alvin's dungeon. No one really listened. In fact, while I was gone, people actually embraced dragons even more. He says it was like they own little connection to me.

We've just reached the entrance to the Dragon Academy when I finally ask, "What about the invasion?"

He looks at me and then away, closing his eyes. Like he's trying to remember. After a few moments of silence, his eyes snap open. "I remember, Mildew he walked away without a word."

My heart speeds up. Could it really be true? Could he really be the one who sent the armada of dragons into the city? He's about to go on, when all of a sudden the door to the Academy opens and I'm suddenly swept up in the Astrid's arms while Fishlegs wraps us both in a bear hug.

They're both talking over each other with excitement in their voices. The twins and Snotlout come up behind them. Even the twins seem happier.

"Did you just talk?" Fishlegs asks. And I give him a weird look.

"He's just getting started." Gobber interjects. "Let's not rush it."

"So what were you two talking about?" Ruffnut asks. As usual, she doesn't know the fine line of staying out of someone's business.

"Some serious matters, Ruffnut. And they certainly don't involve you" Gobber hisses.

"Oh, what's a matter Hiccup? More girlfriend problems?" Snotlout asks. Not even caring about my feelings. I don't how, but this hurts me in a way Snotlout never has. It must show on my face, because he immediately and suddenly tries to take it back.

"SNOTLOUT!" Astrid screams in a tone forged from anger and hatred that it's frightening.

"Okay, not funny."

I'm already sprinting twenty feet away.

"Not funny! Come back!"

"Hiccup!"

"SNOTLOUT!"

The last thing I can hear are viscous screams and arguments aimed at Snotlout.

I zigzag through the Square, sprint past the Plaza, and disappearing into a wardrobe closet of the seamstresses home. But before that, I recall stopping at Goathy's infirmary and snatching a vial of my medicine. I'm hidden behind a clothing rack of silken dresses. My body feels hot from the run and my clothes cling to me so tight, it's constricting. I rip everything off, tossing all but my undertunic aside. I feel so lonely and ragged.

I yank the dresses from their hangers until the rack is bare, then I burrow into it. My escape has done nothing to subdue the rising hysteria inside me. It will drown me unless it's released. I ball up the skirt of a beautiful blue skirt with gold lining, stuff it in my mouth, and begin to scream. How long this goes on, I don't know. And I don't care.

By the time I'm done, my voice is almost gone, and my tonsils are burning. I swallow the vial of medicine in one gulp, heading off my hysteria. It's not enough to right things though. I can hear people calling me, I don't answer. I don't want to. And they'll never find me. Not in this new hiding spot.

I slouch in deeper into the pile of clothing. I lay there. Broken. Swathed in the dresses, I feel like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Awaiting metamorphosis. The effects of the medicine take hold. The world becomes distorted. I always thought this stage in the process would be the most peaceful. At first it is, but as the day dwells on, I only feel more and more suffocated. Trapped by the slippery bindings.

Not allowed to emerge until I've become something better. Better than what I am now. Unscarred. Unburned. Unbroken. I clutch my string pouch filled with the dirt of Skullette's grave with desperate fingers as I prepare for the worst.

The slip of a red dress tickles at my cheek, and I imagine soft rose petals falling on me. I try to imagine I'm in a meadow. Sitting on a bed of daisies and lavender.

Clothed in crimson roses.

The encounter with Alvin has opened the door to my old repertoire of nightmares and fears. Along with the venom of my medicine. My cocoon begins to turn and morph in alarming ways. Little dirt particles float upward, slowly ballooning into bats the size of houses, then shattering into a million embers.

The silk of the dresses transform into slithering snakes and they slither toward me. Fireworm dragons crawl out of my prostatic leg and I can't shake them. Their bodies glow a soft yellow, but they start to crawl up my legs, on my arms. In the distance there's someone screaming. A long high-pitched scream that never stops for a breath. I have a vague idea that it's me.

Sick and disoriented, I tuck my knees up to my chin and wait for death. But I'm not given the mercy of a simple knockout. Wave after wave of horrifying images wrecks my body. There are brief respites I confuse with waking, only to be knocked out again, and entering a greater terror waiting for me. Beginning a new chapter of torture. All the things I dread most, all the things I fear for myself and others manifest in such vivid detail I can't help but believe their real.

How many ways do I watch Skullette die? Relive Mulch's last moments? Feel my own body ripped apart my Outcasts? Leaving me wrecked and feeble. When the guards finally locate me, I'm lying on my side behind the rack in the wardrobe locked in a fetal position, tangled in the dresses, screaming bloody murder.

I fight them at first, until they manage to break the haze and convince me that they're on my side. They peel away the choking garments, but I don't move. I lift my hand to my face, rub my arms. Completely free of Fireworms that never existed. The guards wish to escort me back to my room, but my muscles are too rigid to move because of my iron grip on my body.

I'm afraid that if I let go, I'll disintegrate into ashes. But when I do, the trembling begins. Simply stretching my limbs requires an enormous effort. So many parts of me hurt.

My father and Goathy break through the crowd of guards surrounding me. Goathy's eyes go to the empty vial that somehow shattered. And now lays broken on the floor. She sighs and shakes her head. Very, very slowly, I manage to sit up. My undertunic is damp, and I have a strong idea that it was sweat that did it.

Gobber slowly comes up behind my dad, who's at a loss for words. He looks to me with an emotion I don't know what to name. Pity? Sham? Sorrow? I don't know.

Dad looks at me, then he says, "Let's go son."

His tone was, empty. I can't clarify any emotion. Or even if there was any. Seeing as how he doesn't know how to react to the sight of his son screaming like a psycho on the floor of a wardrobe. I lazily change into my clothes, then slowly walk outside with the guards. I take the lead, guards on all of my sides, and my father behind me. Once outside, I see a gray, snowy dawn spreading across the sky.

As we walk through the village, it might be my imagination, but I think the villagers are either following, or eyeballing me. We pass the Square, then enter the cul-de-sac of houses before bounding the steps of my own.

When we walk in, I come to find everyone waiting in the living room. Sitting by the fire pit. Astrid's stirring something in the pot, Fishlegs reading over the Book of Dragons. The twins just sitting anxiously. Toothless lying at Astrid's feet. Their heads all snap up when the door opens.

Gobber enters and walks past me sauntering over to the pot over the fire pit. He makes a feeble attempt to get me to talk again, but seeing it's pointless, gives up. I can sense the hatred toward Snotlout grow. Toothless pushes himself up and walks over to me and

nudges my hand. I don't move it. Astrid brings forward a tray of food and a medicine vial she should know I don't have the stomach for.

"You must be hungry." She says softly. But in the sense that she's afraid I'll run off again.

As I slowly make my way over to the fire pit, Fishlegs practically drops the book and rushes to get me a chair. Astrid places tray "consisting of a cored apple and a bowl of broth" across my thighs and slips me a spoon. "When you're done, you can go and take a nice relaxing bath we've drawn for you." she says.

I nod numbly.

Eating the broth is difficult since I wasn't very hungry to begin with. But I force it down to calm everyone's nerves. If I wasn't so wrecked, I would say that this is Astrid's best batch yet, since her Yaknog from Snoggletog wasn't exactly the most edible. I'm about halfway through the bowl when I hear footsteps come down the staircase.

"Okay Astrid, his bed is made." My eyes widen, my muscles tense, and my head snaps up. Snotlout has just reached the last three steps down when we see each other. His face contorts into fear at the sight of me. Suddenly, all of the things that Snotlout has ever said to me since we were no more than five years old, pours into my mind, filling me to the brim with hatred, and anger.

Now technically I'm unarmed. But no one should ever underestimate the harm that fingernails can do, especially if the target is unprepared. And mine haven't been treated since they broke from my digging them into Skullette's grave. Makin them jagged and sharp.

My face breaks into a vicious snarl, and I lunge forward, spilling the tray and broth all over the floor. I reach Snotlout in a blaze and I'm raking them down his face, causing blood to flow and damage to one eye. I'm screaming. A mixture of terrible, terrible things to him, and just wailing like an animal.

Everyone breaks into a sudden panic and Gobber's trying to drag me off. My cold fingers lock around Snotlout's throat. Dad's hands help Gobber's and I'm brought up to my room, my body restrained, my wrists pinned down. I slam my head in fury again and again against my bed and headboard. A needle pokes my arm and my head hurts so badly I stop fighting and continue to wail in a horrible dying-animal way, until my voice gives out.

The drug causes sedation, not sleep, so I'm trapped in a fuzzy, dully aching misery for what feels like eternity. People talk to me in soothing voices that never reach me. All I do is stare at a small hole on my ceiling, letting in the thinnest ray of light that pierces the room with a golden dart. I recall Toothless coming up and nestling at my right side, but I stay still.

I can hear him whimper and cry, but it doesn't reach me either. I don't care.

"Hiccup. Hiccup, I'm, I-I'm sorry." Snotlout's voice comes from the left of my bed and slips me into consciousness. "I didn't mean what I

said. I don't even know why I said it. I had no right. Especially after what you've been through."

I don't answer. Snotlout's good intentions mean less than nothing.

I'm debating on whether to reply or not. Trying to see which would hurt more. Not giving him an answer, or letting him hear me speak, but replying with a cruel comment. I can hear him weeping, but I don't care.

Things are going nothing but down in a spiral since Skullette's death.

So I give up. Done speaking, responding, refuse food and water. They can pump whatever they want into my arm, but it takes more than that to keep a person going once he's lost the will to live.

A lot of people come to visit me, but I make all their words sound like the crickets of crickets in the summer night. Meaningless and distant. Dangerous, but only if approached. Whenever the words start to become distinct, I moan until Goathy gives me either more painkiller medicine or sleep syrup, and that fixes things right up.

Until one time, I open my eyes and find someone I cannot block out looking down at me. Someone who will not plead, or explain, or think she can alter my design with entreaties, because she alone knows how I really operate.

"Mom." I whisper.

"Hi honey." She reaches down and pushes a few strands of hair out of my eyes. I press my face against her hand for a moment. I never knew how frozen inside I was without her touch. Without her love. I must be dreaming. If I am, I never want to wake up. Only she would be the life when living among the dead.

My cheeks tickle and I realize I'm crying. I don't fight my tears because they feel so good. I take her hand and pull it up and lean my cheek against the back of it. I don't need to understand how she got here. Too lost to lose. I let the tendrils of whatever's in me pull me down.

My mother lets me sleep until noon, then rouses me and gives me a cup of chamomile tea. I'm ordered a week of bed rest until I'm better. I need to be for the execution. My whole body aches with exhaustion. So I let my mother doctor me and feed me breakfast in bed and tuck another quilt around me.

She dispatches to get me my pajamas and another blanket. When I'm changed, my mother serves me dinner. I eat three bowls of stew and half a loaf of bread while the others are to dine at the table.

I lose track of time and days, but I couldn't care less. When I'm with my mother, all the destruction, all the disaster, all of the loss I feel melts away. I thrive for it. I tell her everything. And she doesn't offer judgment.

I tell her about Skullette's death and pain carves into her face. She



pulls my head gently into her thigh and pets my head. "Why aren't you crying, honey?" she asks.

"I can't" I whisper in reply.

"Why ever not?" She's rubbing her thumb on my cheek as if she can transfer her grief into my skin, shattering the icy silence within me into something she can understand.

I can't allow that. If I grieve now, how will I ever find my way out again in time to keep my promises?

"Because there will be nothing left of me if I do." I look at my hands, bloodstained, the dirt from Savage's grave mixing in.

She leaves for a moment and returns with a bowl of water and a rag. I don't want to let her wash my hands, but she takes my left, dips the rag into the war water and carefully begins to scrub away the blood, the dirt, and the evidence of all that's been.

The crimson has seeped beneath my skin, entered my veins, and become a part of what's left of me. No amount of scrubbing can erase that. When she finishes the left, she picks up the bowl and moves to my right side, and starts the process again.

Once she's cleaned my palm, out of nowhere I say, "I killed Savage." My voice sounds cold and empty as it echoes through the house. Her hand tightens on mine.

"Why?" she asks. There's no censure in her voice.

"Because I thought he was attacking me."

"Then it was self-defense."

"No. No it wasn't."

"Hiccup, he had attacked you in the past and was probably tasked with killing you if you ever were to capture Alvin. It was self-defense." She continues to clean my hand.

"He wasn't going to kill me, I thought he was, but he wasn't. He was trying to disarm me. He wanted to give me Alvin's most \_precious\_ sword to kill him with at the execution. He was going to let me live." The words make me sick. I thought I'd feel relief to have it out in the open, but I don't.

She's quiet, her fingers still wrapped around mine. "If you thought he was trying to kill you, defending yourself is understandable, Hiccup. I would've done the same."

"No you wouldn't have." I reply with the slightest smile. I've figured my mom to be a peaceful person. Resorting to violence as the very last option. "You'd have kept control. I know you."

Beneath the steadiness of her gaze, pain lingers. "Like how your levelheaded father kept control when Alvin backhanded you during the ceremony?"

"It's not the same."

"I fail to see the difference." She finishes and places the bowl aside, but warms my hands with hers. "You were afraid. You knew him as a killer. Instinct kicked in, and you did what you had to do."

I shake my head, "You would've seen the signs, and stopped."

"Sweetheart, you haven't been reading people right since Mulch."

My voice is a rough whisper. "And Skullette."

She pets my head and kisses just above my temple. "Sweetie,"

"I don't want to talk about it, mom" I interject before she can finish.

"Oh."

She sounds hurt. I don't want to hurt her. I just don't know how to get past the silence consuming me and find anything that feels like hope.

"Mom-"

"It's fine, honey."

"No, it's not fine."

"I thought you'd be at least a little bit receptive."

I can't look at her. "I would've been. I was. Before."

"Before? Before what?"

I whip my head back to face her. "Before everything! Before I saw Mulch get murdered right in front of me. Before I knew Skullette was . . . dead. Before Savage. Before I became this." I gesture toward myself, wondering how she can think washing the blood off my hands makes it any less real.

My entire being breaks down and my eyes overflow with tears and I begin to sob uncontrollably.

She shushes me gently and wraps her arm securely around my shoulder. She leans me down onto her shoulder. Rubbing my back, eyes glowing with fierce conviction. "You're still the same beautiful, stubborn, strong, fascinating Hiccup you were before any of that happened."

My laugh sounds more like a sob, and I clamp my lips shut.

"Listen to me. I know it's been bad for you, honey. I see that. But shutting yourself off from something good because of all the bad that's happened is unfair. For everyone."

I sniff as tears run down my cheeks. I clap my hand over my mouth because I'm starting to make those awful choking sounds that happen when I sob. Mom fetches a small handkerchief and wipes my eyes. I blow my nose so loudly and mop the tears off my face. With that, we end the conversation and let the silence of the house provide as

background music.

It's when mother sits on the side of the bed, tentatively stroking my head, humming a lullaby from my childhood, that I feel something . . . warm inside me. It festers inside me and contaminates my entire being. Leading down into my ore, where I've become so numb. And I love it. It's the greatest thing I've ever felt in a long time. Saving me from the nothing I've become.

And the silence inside me cracks open, just a little. Just enough to let a small piece of hope float to the surface, I grab onto it with desperate fingers.

### 37. Chapter 37

I wake up the following morning to an empty house and no mother in sight. And yet I have a feeling of happiness that is connected to my mother. The sensation's so unexpected that I cling to it. The morning sun lights up my room so brightly. The house is quiet, and I take the moment to feel, free. I lie there, staring out my skylight at the winter sky, pondering how on earth this will all turn out.

The sound of footsteps catches my attention, and I push myself to a sitting position to see whose coming. My father's head peeks out first and his face shows instant relief and happiness to see me sitting up.

"Hiccup!" he says. And he rushes over and wraps me in a hug. "Oh thank Thor you're okay!"

He lets go and I look to him confused. "You were asleep for a few weeks. We thought you were a goner."

"A few weeks?!" I shout out of nowhere.

"And I see you found your voice once again." He says, but under his humor he's trying to be careful on what he says. As if he's scared that if he says the wrong thing, I'll go quiet again. And there will be no getting me back.

So I shyly smile to ease him. My first time getting out of bed, so Dad leaves me for a moment to fetch my clothes while I stretch out my limbs. They're stiffer than I imagined. And it takes several minutes of pacing of my room to bring both feeling and flexibility back. I descend the stairs and am welcomed with my favorite breakfast my mom used to always make.

My appetite has returned with my desire to fight back. I swallow the food and soon after, Dad sends me to a bath. I gather my clothes and then disappear into the bathroom. I ease down into the warm water and sit, up to my neck in suds.

After about ten minutes of soaking, I get ready to scrub my hands, and am spooked to find them clean. My heart beats faster. Who cleaned my hands? My mother? No, it can't be. I focus on scrubbing the rest of my body clean and ask question later. Brushing out my hair takes more time since I didn't brush it before I got in. After about twenty minutes, I finally get out and towel myself off.

I change into my clean clothes and when I open the door, I'm greeted by familiar faces. They try to smile at me, but even Ruffnut and Tuffnut can't conceal their shock at the sight of my body. I stand in front of them with only my undergarments on. Revealing all the parts of my body that are burned, and the lumpy scar that I still have from my first day in battle. Strangely, I'm not even that embarrassed.

"Surprise." Astrid says, but she can't hide the pink that blooms under her cheeks.

I look behind them and see Bertha and the seamstresses sitting at our table. I'm puzzling over their reappearance when I realize that this must be it. The day of the execution. They've come to prep me for the crowd.

Dad escorts everyone out, leaving me alone with the seamstresses. Which I'm strangely comfortable with. They want to make some alters to my uniform. Nothing major, just wanting to fit it better for me since it seems I've lost a few pounds. But to do it, they need to alter it while I have it on. And they can barely touch my patchwork of skin for fear of hurting me.

I tell them I hardly notice the pain anymore, but Bertha still winces as he drapes a long vest around me. It reaches down to my knees. I watch as they edit sketches, erase measurements repeatedly, and bicker back and forth on what to do about my scar. They decide to leave it to show the world what Alvin and his lackeys have scarred me in more ways than one.

I'm not so sure if it's the best decision since the sight of it trigger's Bertha's gag reflex. While watching them, I notice something I'm surprised I didn't see before. The pride these women take in their work. It astounds me. Their so passionate. It almost reflects the way I feel about dragons. They've earned more respect from me.

Once I'm Skullette's Dragon Conqueror uniform, the only scars visible are on my neck, forearms, and hands. I'm waiting for them to strap my sheath, but they tell me I'll get it at the arena. So instead, I remember at the last minute, one final addition I want to add to the uniform. I rush upstairs and my eyes focus on the lavender, its petals spread open while I was out. It fills every inch of the room with it's beautiful perfume.

I freeze for a minute then I slowly make my way to the flower. A ray of sunlight has the flower practically glowing. I approach it carefully, then I tentatively trace my fingers along the soft petals. A brief sense of loss and grief send a static shock through my body. Tears sting my eyes, but I blink them away, and remind myself that today they will be avenged.

Finally.

I carefully take it out of the mug and cradle it with my fingertips. I bring the delicate flower to my nose and inhale the sweet scent. A few tears spill over, scalding my cheeks, and I let out a brief sob. I sniff and wipe my nose with my finger. My hand drifts to the leather pouch I wear with the dirt of Skullette's grave.

I take a deep but shaky breath and sigh as I turn and head back down the stairs.

I find Bertha and the other seamstresses chitchatting together and when they see me with the lavender, they all give me a look that shows that they're touched. "I would like this on my uniform, please." I ask.

Bertha gets up and delicately takes the flower. "Where?" she asks.

My fingers fumble to the necklace. I feel the pouch and find it resting over my heart. "Here." I say and I point. Bertha smiles and looks for a pin.

She secures it to my chest, so it lies right under the leather pouch. The women whisper back and forth, clearly proud of their work, and Bertha flips over a shield so I can see my reflection. I'm genuinely surprised at what they've done. With what I thought was an impossible task, they've done and then added some. They've performed a beauty miracle.

I can't believe how normal they've made me look on the outside when inwardly, I'm a wasteland. I trace my fingers along the stem and petals, then look to her and say, "Thank you."

She smiles and gingerly takes one of my scarred hands and says, "Bless you my child."

We head outside and as I'm adjusting the neckline, I come to find another surprise. Next to Gobber whose talking with Dad. Standing upright, her hands holding one another behind her back, sweeping the dirt back and forth with her foot as she nervously waits. Remarkably unchanged except for the little spark of spirit in her eyes. Compared to mine, vacant.

I walk down the steps, and as I come up to her, she turns and is surprised by my appearance. I'm not too embarrassed since the last time she saw me, I had just helped her rescue her parents. She gives me a soft smile.

"Heather." I say.

"Hi, Hiccup." She leans in and kisses me on the cheek. She rubs my shoulder as she looks at me in my uniform. "Well, looks like you've got a big ahead of you."

I smile and I turn to Dad. But he's already ahead of me. "She's here with her parents to watch Alvin's execution."

I turn back to her. "I wanted to get some closure." She says.

"Weird closure." I say. And almost immediately everyone smiles.

Astrid runs up and hugs me and even does a little squeal. "Oh Hiccup, it's great to hear you talk again." She says, and she even looks like she's on the verge of crying.

I can't help but find the whole situation amusing. I don't speak and

now everyone's treating every single word I say like it's a gift from Thor. Dad comes up and places a hand on my shoulder, "It's time, Hiccup."

"Okay." I say back to him.

We all walk together to the arena and while most of the villagers are already there, the rest come and follow close behind me. Excitement and eagerness on their faces. I receive pats and warm words of encouragement. The gate opens and I walk in alone while Dad takes his place after saying good luck.

Everyone gives me their regards as I walk into the slope area before officially entering the arena. Gobber helps me with some last minute adjustments then we hear a tap on the stone and Snotlout steps in. Just the sight of him brings back the painful memory of our attack.

"Gobber, can you give us a minute?" I ask, and he steps out without question. Snotlout's gaze follows him, pleading with him not to go, but Gobber walks past him. One out of sight, Snotlout turns to me, fear in his eyes. A closer look and I can see the skin that rose up when I scratched him. Small bruises with the faintest fingerprints are on his neck.

"I'm sorry." He becomes confused. "About, attacking you."

"No, no you shouldn't be. I, I deserved it." He admits.

"Oh my gods." I say and he turns to me. "I think I just heard hell freeze over." I say and I emphasize by cupping my hand to my ear. This joke manages to draw a chuckle from both of us.

He extends his hand for a handshake, and I'm a little hesitant since he did this for Thawfest. But I take it and we both give each other a firm shake. "Good luck." Then he leaves.

Astrid comes in after him and once she's in front of me, we examine each other. I'm searching for something to hang on to. Some sign of the boy who and girl who met each other in an arena by chance and became inseparable. I'm wondering what would have happened to them if the boy had not joined the war.

If she would have fallen in love with the boy, married him even. And sometime in the future, when brothers and sisters have been raised up, ran off together into the sunset, and left the world forever. Would they have been happy, out in the world, or would the dark twisted sadness between them have grown up even without the war's help?

"I brought you this." Astrid holds up a sheath when I take it, I notice it holds a single, ordinary arrow.

"The last shot of the war." I mutter, and she nods. I think we all silently agreed that I'd shoot Alvin rather than use his own sword to stab him. I've had more than my fair share of blood splattered on me in one lifetime. "What if I miss? Does Dad retrieve it and bring it back to me? Or do I just stab Alvin in the heart?"

"You won't miss." Astrid adjusts the sheath onto my back.

We stand there, face-to-face, not meeting each other's eyes. "You never really tried to befriend her." She doesn't answer, so finally I just say it. "Do you even miss her?"

"I don't know." She says. "Does it even matter? You'll always be thinking about it."

She waits for me to deny it; I want to deny it, but it's true. Even now I can see the flash that ignites her, feel the heat of the flames. My silence is my answer.

"Shoot straight, okay?" she says. Then she touches my cheek and leaves. I want to call her back and tell her that I was wrong. That I'll find a way to make peace with this. Take into account my own inexcusable crimes. Dig up the truth about who really sent the dragons into the city. Forgive her. But since I can't, I'll just have to deal with the pain.

Gobber comes in seconds after, readying me to usher me into the arena. I collect my bow and at the last minute I remember the arrowhead I received from my Outcast ally. I shift through the hidden pockets and pull it out. Gobber helps me remove the old arrow tip and replace it with the new one. It's a perfect fit.

"Come on." He tells me. "We have an audience waiting."

The arena runs over, spills people around the cage covering. Trying to get the best look they can. Others take their places outside: Guards. Officials. Squad leaders. I hear the cheers that indicate dad has reached the stage. Then Gobber taps my shoulder, I take a deep breath, and step out into the cold winter sunlight. Walk to my position, accompanied by the deafening roar of the crowd.

As directed, I turn so they can see me in profile, and wait. When they march Alvin out of one of the old dragon cages, the audience goes insane. They secure his hands behind a post, which is unnecessary, he's not going anywhere. There's nowhere to go. No wonder they didn't have me practice. He's ten yards in front of me.

My grip tightens on the grip of my bow. I take a deep breath. Reach back and grasp the arrow. Position it, aim at his chest, but watch his face. He coughs and a bloody dribble runs down his chin, polluting his beard. His tongue flicks over his puffy lips. I search his eyes for the slightest sign of anything, fear, remorse, anger. But there's only the same look of amusement that ended our last conversation.

My eyes flick upward and I see Mildew standing directly behind him. His face has even more pleasure than Alvin's. His little sheep Fungus watching without a care. Mildew holds his staff of dragon teeth proudly, baring a snaggletooth smile. His eyes burn with pleasure at the sight of Alvin perishing. Perishing for his cause.

My heart skips a beat. What did I just say?! Does this mean that I actually believe Alvin?

It's as if he's speaking the words again. \_"Oh Hiccup. I thought you were a smart boy."\_

I don't know what to do. My body locks in place, and people wait for me to release the string. My heart speeds up. Then, as if on cue, a soft breeze kicks up. A small petal from my lavender - the size of my pinkie nail - twitches off the flower, rides the wave of wind and makes it way to Mildew.

My eyes widen. It had just brushed past his nose when he swats it away with his bony hand.

"\_I thought you were a smart boy."\_

He's right. I am. But I want to get them both at the same time. My fingers have all but decided to release the arrow, and the crowd is growing restless.

The point of my arrow rises and I release the string. The arrow nails him in the skull.

After a gasp of breath, Mildew collapses over the bars of the arena and plummets into the ground of the arena. Dead. Splattering in a pool of his own blood.

In the stunned reaction that follows, I'm aware of one sound. Alvin's laughter. An awful gurgling cackle accompanied by an eruption of foamy blood when the coughing begins. I see him bend forward, spewing out his life.

I grow impatient, then I snatch my knife from its sheath and charge straight for Alvin.

I hear someone call my name, but I block it out. I keep running. I grip my knife with steady fingers. I raise my blade and bury it into Alvin's liver. Blood runs down the hilt and onto my hand. Small splatters land on my uniform, but I don't look.

Instead, I watch as Alvin's eyes become very pale. The color slowly being drained. While guards go to investigate Mildew's lifeless, bloody body, I think of what my brief future as the assassin of a village elder holds.

The interrogation, probable torture, certain public execution. Having to say my final goodbye to the handful of people who still maintain a hold on my heart. The prospect of facing my father, who will now be entirely alone in the world, decides it.

I lean in, close to Alvin's ear, as he helplessly gasps, and whisper, "Good night."

And I feel him go still.

### 38. Chapter 38

After standing with my knife driven into Alvin's liver for a handful of seconds, I lean back, yank my knife free, and let the blood permeate my uniform and flow down my hand. Within seconds, the Vikings who were standing on the outside begin to jump in. Flooding the arena. I drop the knife and feel for my bow, but I flung it away when I pulled my knife.



The Vikings descend on me, but I don't run. Instead, I twist my neck down to rip away the pocket containing the Oleander berry. But instead, my teeth bite into something dry, and scaly. I jerk back to find Toothless covering the berry with his ear.

"Toothless move!" I demand. And he just grunts in return.

Suddenly, I'm jerked away from him with a hard yank that could possibly cause whiplash. The pocket gets ripped open and I watch as the berry becomes flat under Spitelout's boot. I transform into a wild animal. Kicking, clawing, biting and screaming. Doing whatever I can to free me from this web of hands.

Guards and Vikings alike lift me up above the crowd. I continue to thrash as I'm conveyed over the sea of people.

I start screaming for Skullette.

But it's pointless. And I know that. But she's the only person who I know would try to get me out of here. Even if it meant splattering blood all over the stones. But she can't help me.

I cry for my father.

I'm not even sure he knows what to do either. I'm not even sure he can help me. I've just committed the highest treason there ever was on Berk. Not even the power of being chief can save me tonight.

I'm on my own.

I keep thrashing until someone slams a bludgeon into my head. Knocking me unconscious. When I wake, I have a terrible pain in my head that hammers me from the inside. I open my eyes, but all I see is blackness. The world turns left and right and I feel sick. Voices from above are muffled but can be heard.

There's creaking and I catch the scent of salt. I'm on a boat. I'm about to move when I feel my hands are cold. I yank them forward, but they go no more than a centimeter. I'm chained to the back of the boat. I'm chained and blindfolded. They made sure to keep the chains short enough so that I couldn't move my hands behind my head and remove my blindfold.

Wherever they're taking me, they don't want me to see. I can't hear my father's voice, in fact no one sounds familiar. I continue to wriggle to no avail of freeing myself. I've never really ridden on a boat that often, so it feels like my intestines are being flopped and tossed and thrown all around the inside of my body. I have to literally put all my energy into fighting against the urge to convulse.

Footsteps can be heard and that's when I figure out that I'm below deck. The boots sound heavy on the wood floor. Judging from the sound of how dense, the man must be a guard. A big and very muscular man.

"Hello Hiccup. Glad to see you're awake." He says, but I don't reply. I hear him kneel down beside me and he talks to me in a stern voice. While I don't pay close attention to some parts, I get the main

idea.

For the next number of days, sea mammals will supplement my diet and provide skins as we travel to my holding facility. He doesn't tell me what's going on, but I can take a wild guess. He also tells me they'll also make good ivory and oil. These are important trade commodities back home. I don't know why, not like I need to know that.

He tells me I'll be gone for a while and the trip to my holding facility will be a good few days. He can say whatever he wants. Like I care. I can hear his lips moving, but I just learned not to hear. "Nonetheless, we're advised to keep you well hydrated and fed. So try and keep things down until we get there." He tells me. Or more like he demands. "Don't think we feel sorry for you since you've been branded as a traitor."

The tone in his voice notifies me that he's a, former, Outcast soldier. I snarl and once I calculate where he is, I thrust my legs up and manage to find his shoulder, I bend my knees in and constrict them around his neck. He gasps and wheezes, but I lock my knees like a vise. Clenching all of what I've lost, all of what his terrible leader has done, and am hoping that I can relieve the pain by strangling him.

He slams his fist into the wooden floor and more footsteps are heard rushing down the stairs. Men jabber and yell as they try to get me off. I begin to scream. A horrible, blood-curdling sound that ices anyone's blood.

There's a metallic whoosh and the next thing I feel is a severe sting on my leg. This was on my calf, and when I don't loosen my grip, the next one's above my knee. Finally the pain too harsh that I let go and collapse on the floor. I tuck my knees into my chest, but with the feeling of satisfaction that I've bruised the man's neck.

I'm told that our supper for tonight consists of whale blubber, fish, and some sea plant I can't name. Not trusting anyone, my instincts say to deny it, but a familiar smell catches my attention. Dandelion. Light footsteps walk toward me. I jerk my head up, and they pause, but resume in my direction in a minute.

"Hello?" I whisper.

"It's me." a soft feminine voice says.

\_It's her!\_ "It's you." I say out loud, but at a whisper.

"Yes."

"I'm so glad you're okay." I admit.

"Are you, okay?" she hesitates on the last word, knowing it's an obvious question. But I'm so relieved to, hear someone who still cares about me and is still trying to help me.

"I'm fine. And thank you. For everything you've done. I never would've survived without your kindness." She lets out a soft breath that might've been a chuckle. Then I feel a light kiss on my

forehead.

I'm given a fair serving of dinner, and I take each sip as she gingerly brings a spoon to my lips and feel the fat drift down my throat. It has a bitter taste to it, and a long-lasting aftertaste. But it's so fattening that grease drips down my chin. I feel her dab my chin with a cloth, then wipe my mouth.

She keeps this up until she says the bowl's empty. "What's your name?" I ask.

There's a pause, and I guess she's looking around so no one will see, and then I feel her lean in close and whisper, "Lola."

With that, she leaves, and I want to call her back. To stay with me and help the loneliness I feel creep back to the hole it once came from. To help me before I come undone. I want her to save me from the nothing that I've become. Now that I know what I've lost, what I'm without, I don't want her to leave me. She can't leave me.

But then again, any recognition for her might result in me never seeing her again. Now that I'm an official juvenile, they'll probably want to take away everything I care about as a form of punishment.

That I'm not allowed to enjoy anything. So I let her go, and the yawning pit of loneliness and darkness grows wider and deepens. Even if it consumes me, the silence that's furlong been with me since Skullette's death, can help numb the pain.

I'll numb the pain until I'm practically made of stone.

Now that the meal's over, I'm fighting to keep the food down. My stomach's not used to the greasy foreign food. But I'm determined to keep it down. Soon my stomach feels uneasy, and the confinement of being below deck drives me insane. I begin to thrash like a caged animal who's extremely agitated.

No one comes to me even when I result to whimpering. I could thrash long enough for them to think that I'm having an anxiety attack, then maybe they'll unchain me and let me above deck. No one comes. But then there's the sound of an argument and Lola's voice can be heard.

I'm pretty sure she's arguing to let me go. When I hear a man talking, denying her, I start to frantically struggle as if I'm going crazy. When I hear Lola's voice again, I calm down enough so that I can hear her above the chains.

There's quiet chatter back and forth. Footsteps can be heard. Then suddenly, I hear the sound of a latch unlock and there's the sound of a metal-bar door yanked open. The salty-sea air infects my nose and I feel the cool sea breeze brush my face. Only then do I realize my forehead is moist with sweat.

The breeze makes my hair flop and flip everywhere. Whatever strands that get caught on my forehead stick together; forming bigger and bigger strands on my forehead. Lola's footsteps come up to me and I feel her wipe my forehead clean.

I try to use her as a reason to hold on. It's enough to keep the loneliness at bay, but not enough to destroy it.

The next couple of days are gurgling, and the only pleasantries I have to hold onto is the fact that I've managed to keep my breakfast, lunch, and dinners down in my stomach. After eating blubber, even for a couple of days, I crave deer meat more than I ever have.

Lola comes down periodically and I can feel the loneliness slowly deteriorate every time she comes down. For the next three days, I resort to sleeping the entire trip. Even through meals unless something appeals to me. Lola coaxes whatever she can into me, then when she knows that's all she's getting, she leaves me alone.

For the next three days, I sleep, eat whatever food Lola gives me, then go back to sleep again. This is the most relaxed I can get on this ship. I slowly begin to deteriorate like the mist on water's surface. Slowly becoming too lost to lose. Becoming numb from the inside out. Like my spirit's been banished to somewhere dark. Sleeping somewhere cold until someone finds it there and leads it back to me.

On the final day, the morning brings distress. My rejection of meals has burned me. My head throbs with every beat of my heart. Okay maybe it wasn't the best plan I could've come up with, but at least I lasted until the ride was over.

I'm released from the shackles on the wall, but my wrists have no mercy as seconds after, they're tied with a thick rough rope that scratches my skin with tiny claws. I'm half dragged, half carried up above deck, and then two crew members lay down the bridge connecting us to the dock.

I continue to jerk and jab, but the men still retain a tight grip on my biceps. I feel that dirt below our feet change into stone steps, then I hear a wooden door be chucked open, and then I'm lead into a room, then deposited onto a hard floor with a tapestry for a rug. The cuffs are removed and the door is slammed and locked behind me.

When I untie the blindfold, I find myself in a completely different room. In some home I don't recognize. I look around and find barred windows and the room is bare. Leaving it hollower than ever. The bed consists of nothing but a simple quilt that too thin to keep the winter from biting at my skin.

I push myself up, though it's a struggle to get to my feet, and walk over to the window where I look out and see a gray overcast in the sky. I look left and right and see the island is bare. No trees, no life. Anywhere. When my eyes find the charred remains of multiple buildings, I feel everything inside me go numb.

I'm back on Outcast Island.

Back to the place I destroyed. And my window has the perfect view of the entire city. And it hits me. I'm in Alvin's old compound. His quarters. It survived the fire. Where he stood by and watched his city burn at the hands of a child. That child who destroyed everything. That boy, who thought joining the war, would help protect those he loved. But really, it only brought them to their death.

I'm surprised how intact the place still is. The only reminisce is the burned edges of the wood. Small fissures in the windows.

Figures they would put me in a place where I can look at the destruction I've cause straight in the eye. I can still faintly make out some of the bodies of citizens that tried to flee, but were overcome by the smoke. They now lay in various stages of decomposition. Food for scavengers. Blanketed by flies.

It's a cruel form of retribution. But it's what I deserve.

I was stupid to believe that whatever I had before could ever come to life again. No one will cry for my absence. They've probably already forgotten me. Am I that unimportant? Am I so insignificant? I only have myself to blame for it all.

The world I knew won't come back.

The life I had won't be mine again.

I walk away from the window and tour the small room. There's a closet that's been stripped bare and another leads to the bathroom. I step in and peel of my Dragon Conqueror uniform, but not before I unpin the lavender and gingerly sprawl it across the edge of the tub.

I manage to catch my faint reflection in the window. I'm badly bruised, even though the ones on my ribs have healed, it looks like they've faded and spread to other parts of my body. It hurts to strain my fingers. I think I might've broken two. There are purple and black bruises on my forearms from my struggle with the guards. I can easily make out handprints.

My head turns to the side and I can still clearly see the insignia of the Outcasts on my neck. I wish that skin would just peel off. I want to reminder. In some parts of my burned skin, my veins have risen up, giving me a freaky skeletal effect. The skin had easily blistered and ripped from the pulling and yanking in the crowd.

I lock the bathroom door and ignite the pitch coated logs beneath the water pump. The glow from the logs adds onto the light from the window. But with the gray overcast, I use the glow to help me find my way around.

The pump whistles softly to tell me the water is warm enough and I release the handle to drain its contents into the carved stone tub resting in the center of the room. The water stings against my cuts, and blood pollutes the water. With no soap, I simply rinse off, splash my face, soak and ruffle my hair, then towel off. There's nothing clean for me to put on, just the towel around my waist.

When I step out back into the room, my Dragon Conqueror suit has disappeared. In its place is an old, ragged and torn tunic with long sleeves, and simple pants and a boot. Even when I put them on, small blood spots bloom through the fabric. Goathy doesn't show up, no doctors do. But I don't care. I'm too far gone to care. Am I too lost to be saved?

I fall onto the bed and curl my knees into my chest, hoping to bleed to death. But it never happens. By late evening, the blood clots leaving me sticky and stiff, but still alive. I feel around for the

lavender and bring it close to my chest, wishing, praying the Skullette can still help me. Or my mother. Someone.

I must've dozed off because when I push to a sitting position, I look to the small nightstand and see a meal has been sent up along with a vial of my medicine. I eat the food, swallow the medicine, and curl back up on the bloodstained wooden bed. I try to kill the pain, but I only bring more.

I lay down, dying from the inside, pouring crimson regret and betrayal. I cry, pray, and scream to Thor to return salvation to me. I feel like I'm dying. I long to die. My wounds cry for the grave. My soul cries for deliverance. Will I be denied because of what I've done?

\_Please,\_ I beg. \_Let mercy come and wash all that away.\_

Recompense.

I'll face myself, erase it all, cross out what I've become. I'll face it all. Just to let it go. Put it to rest.

On the bed I lay, motionless and in pain. Losing everything. I can just see my life passing me by. I keep rethinking over and over how there's nothing left for me. My mother's dead. My lover's dead. My best friend was murdered. The other went mad. Brothers had died keeping me alive. A dragon is forever frozen in mud thanks to me. Citizens lost their homes because of me.

My father will probably disown me for shaming his name and for embarrassing him.

My friends would never commit to being friends with the village's assassin. If that's what I'm being called now.

There' just nothing left for me. Nothing.

I won't survive. I can't go on living this way. I'll never find a way to heal my broken soul.

The only things left for me is on the other side. A better life. I will be waiting until the day that I see her on the other side. Undo everything and take me. Take me home. Break these chains and let me fly to you.

The leather pouch that rests over my chest, filled with the dirt of Skullette's grave, becomes clutched in my fingers. Even though I'm on a level above the ground, with the bars, I can't jump to my death. I don't know how to make a noose, and the blanket's too small. I doubt I'll be given a daily dose of my medicine. And with it being a liquid, I could never hoard enough to knock me out with lethal dose.

I look over the thick wooden door and can see the shadow of two guards' feet standing outside. I'm being closely watched and listened for. Back on Berk, Dad's probably testifying against my possible execution. The icy silence still lingering has swallowed any symbol of hope I had left.

Even with Gobber at my father's side, killing I village elder is something even the chief can't defend too much against.

All I can do is give up. I resort to just lying on the bed without accepting any water, food or taking the medicine. I could do it too. Just die. If it weren't for the shooting pains, chills and severe tremors from the withdrawal of the drug.

Almost every time my attempt is crushed like an eggshell, and I spend my time on my hands and knees dipping my fingers into the green puddle and sucking the precious poison down my throat. It's hard to do since it's surrounded my glass from when I shattered the vial in a much stronger moment.

Look at what I've been reduced to.

I revise my plan of suicide by starvation. I'll just become a pale-skinned skeleton with huge eyes. I'm a couple days into my plan when one day, the unexpected happens.

Toothless comes in.

I had just woken up from a nap. It's getting harder and harder to stay awake, but when I wake up, I'm only disappointed. He slowly walks in and does a double take, not recognizing me. I stretch out my bony hand and he touches my palm. That same gesture that could never be forgotten.

Tears sting my eyes and I struggle to reach him. I don't have to. He hops onto the bed with me and circles me before lying down. His head by mine, and I pet his snout. He gently purrs and I can see a pain in his eyes. I'm sorry he has to see me like this. See what I've become and what I've been reduced to.

His tale curls around my legs, blocking a cold breeze, and his pitch-black wing unfolds and hover over me, providing warmth and shade from the bitter cold. He stays with me. He never leaves. And I feel a small sense of protection and love.

Just a tiny bit, but it's enough for me to cling to for just a little longer.

### 39. Chapter 39

Days pass, weeks. I watch as the snow falls. Covering the black ash, becoming soot. It gently lands on the windowsill, frosting the windows. I try and draw little pictures depending on the spaces I have. I try to find some things to do, but my strength has deceased since I'm still going forward with my suicide plan.

And in all that time, Toothless is the only company I have.

He's there when I'm ready to sleep. He keeps me warm during the night. And that's when I realize he was my one true friend out of everybody.

\_ "You may feel you're alone, but I'm still here with you."\_ I can practically hear him say.

It's just too hard to say goodbye to him. One day I just listen to the rain as it falls. I listen to each drop. Whispering secrets in vain. Frantically searching for someone to hear their story before they hit ground. Listen. Listen. Weeping. I stand alone in the storm. Suddenly sweet words take vain. \_"Hurry,"\_ they say. \_"For you haven't much time. Open your eyes to the love around you."\_ You can do what you dream, just remember to listen to the rain.

I chip off a sharp piece of wood and begin to carve pictures of Toothless into the wooden floor and sometimes the wall s if I ran out of room. I have about half of the room carved in a number of days.

What are they doing anyway? What's the holdup out there? How difficult is it to arrange the execution of one murderous boy? Nonetheless, I continue with my own annihilation. My body's thinner than it's ever been, and my battle against hunger is so fierce that sometimes the animal part of me gives into the temptation of roast beef and fish stew.

Sometimes I'm served buttered bread, but I eat what I can stomach and give the rest to Toothless. He might even be gaining weight. But still, I'm winning. For a few days, I feel quite unwell, and think that I may finally be traveling out of this life. Toothless can sense it too. They say a Night Fury can sense an oncoming death.

Then I realize that my medicine servings are slimming. They would serve me a vial every day, but now it's slowly reducing to once a week. Are they slowly trying to wean me off the stuff? Are they afraid I'll become addicted and abuse it like I did that one time? But why? Surely a drugged traitor will be easier to dispose of.

And then a terrible thought hits me. What if they don't plan on disposing me right away? What if I'm not given that luxury? What if they want to torture me so severely that I'll be begging for mercy, and they'll have the ability to deny me?

I won't allow it. If I can't kill myself in this room, I'll do it the second the first opportunity outside of it arises. I'll finish the job.

Joining the war has given some incite of the human kind. Its shown me the true nature of humans. I thought that if I joined the war, I could stop Alvin and save those that I love. But in reality, they joined to protect \_me\_. We were just going in circles. And it doesn't matter who wins, the result I the same. A man killing a man to grab power.

No one will ever brainwash me again into using any weapon on any man. Friend or foe. In the end who does it benefit? No one. Lives are lost, people mourned. There's something wrong with the way creatures like us think if we need to sacrifice precious lives just to settles our differences.

After two days of my lying on my bed with no attempt to eat, drink, or even take my medicine, Toothless constantly wines. He's worried. And I want to tell him that it's okay. That I wanted this. Tell him to take care of my father and the others. But I can't I'm too weak to care.



I just stare out of the window. Suddenly the lock unlatches and it creaks open. Someone crosses into my field of vision. Dad. I don't even look him in the eye. My eyes just readjust to the scale mail armor on his tunic. I hear him sigh heavily. He kneels down so he's in my sight. I can just see the vacant look in his eyes. Possibly even a tear.

He lifts his big meaty hand and slowly moves it toward my sunken cheeks. He hesitates, and I think this is the first time he realizes the size advantage he's had over me for years. Only now he sees it now that I'm a walking skeleton. I continue to smoothly breathe, and when he places his hand on my cheek, even in the gentlest way he can, I begin to cry.

He's not hurting me, and I'm scared that's that he think he's doing. I'm crying because I don't want him to see me like this. Because I don't want him to see that I've given up on him even while he was fighting to keep me alive. And because I just want it all to end. I want my suffering, my loss, me grieving. I want it all to end.

"I want it to end, Dad. Please, make it end." I beg to him in a whispered sob.

His eyes become glassy with tears. He struggles to hold back sobs as he tries to speak. "I'm so, I'm so sorry, son." He cries, and the tears escape him and they flow down his rosy cheeks and splatter onto the wood of my bed. "I did this."

He leans forward and rests his arm on the edge of the bed. "I never meant for you to suffer so much loss. I blame myself. After I lost your mother, all I wanted was for you to be happy. And a-at first I thought you joining the war would help, but . . . but it's only made me lose my son." He begins to make the same choking sounds I make when I'm upset. His voice cracked on a few of his words.

I realize now that I'm not the only one who is broken. Our proud chief, Stoick the Vast, is just as broken as I am. I've lost so many things. But my father lost the one thing in this rotting world that gave him a purpose. A reason to hold on.

Me.

We may have had our differences in the past, but I had served a bigger purpose in life than I thought. I gave my father a reason to keep going. We may not have always seen eye to eye, (literally and metaphorically) but I was the only connection my father had to my mother. I was his reason to stay strong and push forward. It was all for me.

And now here I am, a pale-skinned living skeleton that only wants to die. I don't know what to do. I'm so close to finishing my plan, but now I don't want to leave my Dad. I don't need to say anything.

Dad collects himself then talks to me in his normal voice. "You're trial's over, son." He says. "You're coming home."

Home? Is he serious? He must see my thoughts on my face because he continues. "After careful debating and tossing details back and forth, we came to find out that Mildew was the one responsible for sending the armada of dragons into the city. He was hoping that by

showing you what dragon can do, you'd somehow agree with him that they're no good. He knew everyone would listen to you. And I guess he thought to use that to his advantage."

"So what now?" I ask.

"Well, we go home. You were tried as Not Guilty. Now let's go home."

Even if I wanted to, I'm too weak to move. Goathy comes in with a stranger and they rehydrate me, feed me, bathe me, clothe me. Then Dad drapes his fur cape over my shivering body, and lifts me like I'm as light as a rag doll. He carries me to Tornado where we fly back to Berk. Ever since the ride to Outcast Island, I don't want to ride a boat for awhile. But we hover close above so Toothless doesn't get agitated.

As the wind courses my hair, I try to think of what I'm going to do. I never expected to live after I shot Mildew. But now, I don't know what to do now that the war's over. I could go back to the Dragon Academy, but not even I think I'm in a stable enough condition to work there again. Besides, the whole village probably thinks I'm a hopeless traumatized juvenile delinquent. They won't even want to come near me. Let alone trust me to run an Academy surrounded by dragons.

One condition upon my release is that I go into therapy like Bucket to help me with my traumas. I don't know how long, but I'm hoping not. I've been through so much, the last thing I want to do is talk about it. It's around late evening when we arrive at the docks of Berk. The sun was just on the horizon, providing a beautiful purple and pink sunset.

There are guards on every side of me as we land. I step off, a little groggy, but I hold myself up. All I have to do is survive the walk back to my house and then I can crash onto my own bed. Toothless leaps off of the boat and is by my side in seconds.

I catch my reflection on the water's glassy surface and I see that while I look hydrated, I still have dead eyes, slightly hollow cheeks and my arms have lost a little fat due to my suicide plan. I ruffle my hair and walk forward. The guards follow my every move.

Out of the crowd, I hear my name called. "Hiccup!" I look over my shoulder and see Astrid rushing toward me. But the minute she's close enough to see me, her face morphs into shock and horror and sadness. She stares at me for a minute. She steps forward, extending a hand, but the guards form an X with their spears.

I don't say anything, instead Dad steps up and speaks for me. "Uh, Hiccup's still trying to recover from those harsh days on the island. We're not ready to have him interact with people yet."

I look to Dad and just take a deep breath. \_Interact with the public?\_

What am I going to do? Pull a knife on them and attack out of nowhere? He makes it sound like I'm going to snap at any moment. Like one word from anyone and I'll just raid the village and lay siege to it. The \_real\_ reason I'm not interacting is because I've tried to

kill myself multiple times, and since I still resemble a skeleton, I don't really feel confident enough to talk to anyone.

And I'm tired. So tired.

Fishlegs and the others come up behind Astrid and they all show shock and horror. "Hiccup?" Fishlegs cries.

I ignore him and walk with the guards up to my house. All through the entire walk, everyone stares at me and they make room for me as I approach my house. The house has a warm glow to it and I can see smoke coming from the skylight. I walk in and find that Gobber has built a fire. There's a pot of fish stew brewing over the wood and Gobber pokes at them with his sword.

"Oh, hey Hiccup. Glad you back." he says. I allow a small smile. Or more like turning the corners of my mouth upwards.

I pull up a kitchen chair, but I don't accept a bowl of stew. Instead, I pull my knees to my chest, clutching them tightly. Dad comes over and hands me the lavender that he thankfully remembered to get before we left Outcast Island. I take it in my hands and bring the flower to my nose and inhale. The smell calms me.

While still holding the flower, my fingers reach for the leather pouch containing the dirt of Skullette's grave. Combine the physical evidence and the smell, if I close my eyes, I can just picture her standing on the other side of the fire, poking at the logs, making sure the stew doesn't overcook.

I keep my eyes close to savor the image. I don't want it to leave.

"Hiccup, we'll leave you to settle. We're going to head to the Great Hall for a banquet. Feel free to join us if you please."

As the sound of their footsteps fade away, I whisper. "I doubt it."

It feels like my thoughts have locked me in place. I'm unable to leave from the chair. I'm not allowed to do anything but sit here and think. Even with Toothless laying at me feet, the rest of the house feel cold and dark. Toothless brings me my blanket and I pull it on, and continue watching the flames.

I guess I must've fallen asleep since the next time I open my eyes, it's morning. I find myself in my bed, tucked under three quilts, and the smell of eggs caresses my nose. There's banging going on around the fire pit downstairs. I wake with an annoying headache, but the pain subsides when I let the sunlight and room come into focus. Toothless still hasn't left my side as my prostatic leg braises his tail.

I walk downstairs and find Gobber poking at the logs over the fire. I would be surprised, but Dad was never one to cook. And I did recall hearing Gobber cooks on occasions.

"Morning Hiccup." He says, and he hands me two eggs and some cold yak milk.

He doesn't leave until I've finished them. Then he tells me he'll be back to help with dinner. Dad's heading out for a few days with Tornado to Outcast Island. He doesn't tell me why and I don't ask. After breakfast, Gobber does dishes then leaves to head to the blacksmith shop.

Then he comes again at supper time and serves me and Dad some wild hog meat and some berries. I don't know if he's just being friendly out of sympathy, or because he was assigned by the village to babysit me since I'm allegedly crazy. But he and I both know I don't want any company besides Toothless. Since he was the only one who was there for me while I was on trial.

Everything becomes a cycle. Gobber cooks, I eat. I try to think of something I can do. But nothing comes to mind. I don't think there's any reason to taking my life anymore. No one comes to visit me, but after months of my solitary confinement, just having Gobber over feels like a crowd.

One day he tells me, "Spring is in the air, Hiccup. You should get out. Breathe some fresh air." He says as he covers a pot of some stew.

I look out the door I just realized he left open and see the grounds green again. And small flower buds sprout from around the Square and birds chirp in the distance. I haven't left the house. I've barely left the kitchen except for the mysterious nights when I woke up in my bed.

The clothes I received from Outcast Island still haven't left my body. I stiffly unbend my knees, and since I don't stretch, I wobble to the doorway, then after I feel circulation return, I walk out and into the village.

There's only one place I want to go. I hop on Toothless and within a blink of my eyes, we're at Skullette's grace.

The white on the cross seems little changed even with the winter snow. Small flowers blossom around the swell of land. I clutch the leather patch around my neck and drop to my knees. Toothless stays a few feet behind me. He knows I want to be alone.

I stare blankly at the grave. Feeling nothing but emptiness. The same feelings that haven't left me ever since her death. Suddenly the words of the song I sang at Hunter's death replay in my mind. I'm surprised at how clear the lyrics are.

"\_Dark the stars, and Dark the moon.\_

\_Hush the night and the morning gloom. \_

\_Tell the horses and beat on your drum. \_

\_Gone their master, gone their son."\_

"I did it Skullette." I whisper, and my throat tightens and tears sting my eyes.

"\_Dark the oceans, dark the sky\_

\_Hush the whales and the ocean tide."\_

"I did it."

#### 40. Chapter 40

I return to the house around late evening, with dirt smeared on my hands. I spent the entire day outside at Skullette's grave. The place gives me an unknown sense of peace. I want to lie down, sink beneath the dirt and pebbles, let them slide gently into my lungs and carry me to Skullette and Mulch. I want to, but I can't.

I walk in and see I've just missed dinner.

"Oh, hello Hiccup." My father says when he notices me. "You just missed dinner. There's a turkey leg left if you want it."

"No, thank you. I'm going to bed." I say, and then head upstairs where I spend most of the night tossing and turning. Waking cold and sweaty over and over from horrific nightmares. Sleeping next to Toothless helps.

No one would mess with the unholy offspring of lightning and death.

As the days progress, the cycle becomes apparent. I wake up, eat the meals Gobber makes, periodically visit Skullette's grave, then return home to start the cycle again. Occasionally I would go and visit Bucket since I'm sure now that he's the only one who truly understands me.

The only bright side everyone can see is that I'm getting outside.

I never stop by the Dragon Academy. In the past, it was a place I enjoyed. But now it's only a cruel reminder of the boy I've lost. The boy who enjoyed being around dragons. The boy who was the first Viking to ride a dragon.

The boy who lost everything.

I can't even feel his presence inside me anymore. There's absolutely no reminder of him except for his Night Fury who for some reason refuses to leave the side of a broken and damaged and lunatic boy I've come to know.

One day after Gobber decided to cook me a small lunch, he tells me again to get outside. "Go hunting. I know you . . . used to love doing that." He says cautiously.

"I don't want to." I answer. I used to like it. Past tense. It was something I loved to do with Skullette. Always. To do it without her, it wouldn't be the same. And pointless. No one needs meat now. Besides, I don't have a bow. Mine was confiscated and Thor knows what happened to, hers. "I don't have a bow."

"Go look in the trunk in your room." Gobber says.

After he leaves, I consider going upstairs. Rule it out. When I think about it, having Skullette's bow would be just as good as having the

dirt of her grave hanging above my heart. Another thing that keeps her close to me. And yet, to actually see it; I can't shake the feeling that it'd be too hard.

Much like seeing her grave for the first time, it'll most likely make me go numb and send me deeper into the gaping hole of silence and misery. But after several hours, I decide to go anyway, walking on silent hunter feet, so I don't awaken the ghosts in the house. In the trunk where I keep most of my sketches, I slowly open it and find a long folded cloth placed diagonal so it fits.

My heart skips a beat and I lose my breath for a minute. But move my shaking hands around it and dig for something else in the trunk, making sure my skin doesn't come into contact with the fabric. I already know what's under it. And I'm scared that if I touch it, it'll send images of her death all through my mind. Planting the seed into my mind so it grows and grows and makes it become even more real than I make it. And if that happens, I'll never be the same.

Instead, I dig around until my fingers brush against the blanket we used for our celebratory picnic after I was accepted into the war. A grave mistake that caused this whole nightmare. I slowly pull it out so I don't knock it against the fabric, exposing what lies underneath it.

When I get it out, I slam the trunk shut and rush to my bed, yanking the blanket over my head. I try to block out the flashbacks of Skullette's death, and the last minutes I spent with her. Tears stream down my cheeks and for once, I know why.

It's like her death was almost expected.

The day before and that morning, I had kissed her like I never have before. I spent time with her. She saved my life. I realized I loved her. I told her I loved her. She told me she loved me too. Then after we battled together in the flaming remains that was once Outcast Island, it happened.

I guess in retrospect, I did say everything I needed to say, and I did everything I ever wanted to do with her. Almost everything. I always thought she'd be the one. I was so sure. Sobs wreck my body and I can hear Toothless come up the stairs. He doesn't pull back the blanket, but I hear him settle against the foot of the bed.

I fall asleep as I continue to cry. A gracious dream follows me where I'm running in the woods, and Skullette's ahead, just out of sight. We find our way to the Cove and I teach her my fishing skills. It's quite the long dream since I know the woods so well and the day just started.

We get the biggest haul we've ever gotten. At least three deer, a dozen rabbits and half the squirrels. We trade them all for other essentials and then as we're walking into the village, suddenly, everything grows dark. The sky becomes gray, dry lightning cracks across the sky. The wind kicks up as if there are ten dragons flapping their wings at me.

I look to Skullette who's in front of me the wind blows her hair and her outfit, and yet while I'm blocking my face to keep debris away,

she stands her ground. I call her name but she doesn't respond. She doesn't even look at me. The clouds descend into the Square in the form of a funnel cloud.

I scream her name again and this time, she gives me the slightest glance over her shoulder. Then she bolts forward and is swallowed by the gray. I follow her in. I'm not about to lose her again. I spin and swirl, but the whole time I keep my eyes closed. I feel like a candle in a hurricane. I slam into the ground which still feels rock hard even in my dreams.

Pushing myself up on numb arms, I look ahead and see we were carried to the Cove. Skullette stands several feet from an outcropping of rocks that trail up the side of several thick roots of trees, forming an arc. There are doubled stone doors that are designed just like the ones for the Great Hall.

I have a bad feeling about this place and I want to leave. I call to Skullette, but she doesn't move.

Pleading with her won't even make her turn. I extend a hand to touch her shoulder, but it seems like I can't reach her despite how close we really are. In the blink of an eye, I'm three meters away from her. She slowly turns to face me.

The green in her eyes have faded. Like the color had been sucked out. They now just swim with a deadness that scares me.

"\_Hiccup,"\_ she says in a monotone. She extends her hand and I desperately try to grip it.

But then the stone doors burst open unleashing a violent wind. That only affects Skullette this time. She's desperately pleading, calling to me to save her. I try my best to reach for her. Grab her hand.

I look up to see the cloud morph into a face. The details are poor, and yet the image in my mind is so detailed and clear.

Alvin.

The hideous thing laughs and his mouth opens wide into a perfect circle. He sucks in a deep breath of air. In it, I helplessly watch as every dead person I know by name gets sucked into the gaping hole of his mouth. I scream at him to stop. The screams of the dead pierce my ears and I swear I feel blood trickle down.

Skullette is still with me as the things morphs. I cling to her for desperate life. I look back and see it has now transformed into Mildew. His snaggletooth smile sends the feeling of ants crawling up my legs. My arms. I hang onto a root of a tree as he repeats the actions of Alvin.

His sucks away the Cove so all that's left is the root of an invisible tree, and then I feel Skullette slipping. I beg, plead at her to hold on. She looks to me and there's still no light in her eyes. I tell her it'll be okay. But she looks like she's already given up.

Mildew laughs again and he takes another deep breath.

In an instant, I feel Skullette's wrist leave me hand.

"\_No!\_" I scream as I watch her plummet into the swirling funnel.

I continue to scream her name. It's useless. I watch as she continues to swirl and swirl. And when she's out of my sight, the root snaps and I plummet down to. The funnel cloud splits into two and Alvin and Mildew's laughter taunt me as I spiral downward.

I wake with a start. Pale morning light comes in through the skylight and the creases on the floorboard. My entire body is moist with sweat and I feel Toothless lick my hand as I'm breathing heavy. I pat the back of my hands against my forehead and find myself in my bed. But I'm in the living room. They must've moved my bed downstairs like they did while I was in recovery after defeating the Green Death.

Needing to get out of the house to check to see that the village is still intact, I thrust off the covers and run outside ignoring the thumping of my heart in my head. I yank open the door and bolt down the steps into the Square. Everything's okay. No funnel clouds. No Mildew. No Alvin.

No Skullette.

There are many Vikings walking around, doing everyday chores and duties. Some take notice of me and give me a hello. I nod in return. I take a slow walk out of the Square and into the Plaza. More people. More dragons. All giving me welcome looks and waves. My feet naturally make their way to the blacksmith shop where I come to find Gobber working on a duel-bladed axe.

"Ah, hey Hiccup. Nice of you to join the party." I give him a weak smile and like I did the day the dragons were invading, I pick up a humongous bludgeon and pace it on its hooks. "Care to join me? There are some swords that need sharpening" he invites, but I respectfully decline.

"I'm looking for a new connecting rod." I say.

"Well there are a few over in that barrel. Feel free to give them a little tweaking if needed." Gobber says. His face flushed from the heat of the fire. Covered with burn scars like me.

As he exchanges the axe for a sword, I rummage through the barrel, needing to dig way down through all the swords and spears until I finally find a connecting rod wedged in between them all. I call Toothless in and he lets me exchange the rod, then we leave Gobber with a goodbye.

As we're walking through the village, people continue to give me hellos and waves. Once we come to the recognizable road leading to the Dragon Academy, I pause and take a deep breath.

But the funny thing is, I don't know why I'm so nervous to be going to the Academy. Skullette never really trained with a dragon of her own. And there's also the possibility I'll somehow find the long-lost boy who loved to be around dragons. Who loved everything instead of shutting out everybody who could possibly care about him.



A habit that I created since I thought that it would benefit everyone I cared about. That easily backfired.

Now I just do it because it's easier.

I see the insignia of a Night Fury that signifies the Academy. As I walk up, a bolt of fire shoots through the chain covering, and I dive behind a barrel, waiting for the armada to come and destroy me. Nothing comes. Toothless nudges me to my feet and he helps me balance since my legs started shaking.

We near the chain covering and I finally get the entire arena in view. The first thing my eyes dart to is the blue gradient of Tornado's skin. Then my father's silhouette. Then the students in front of him. I can't understand what he's saying, so instead, I go over and sit on one of the benches bordering the Academy. I never knew my father had the capability to teach a class about dragons. I didn't even know it was in his nature seeing as how his whole life he spent it trying to kill them.

Fishlegs is the first to notice me and he happily and eagerly waves as Dad continues to lecture. As he turns, I see he has the Book of Dragons. He notices me and waves, but doesn't invite me in. I don't mind. I may be here, but I'm just not ready to go in yet.

But I feel something inside me plant itself deep in the bowels of my heart.

A small seedling of the old Hiccup.

The bud takes root. It burrows deep like the Whispering Death dig into the earth. I can feel it penetrate the icy silence. It blooms into a small bud with green leaves.

It feels to impossibly good. I even find myself smiling at the glorious feeling. At last I found him. And I cling to the bud with a desperate longing. Afraid that if I let it go, I'll rot and die. Then there will be no going back.

I decide to hop on Toothless and go to Skullette's grave where I sit in silence. Toothless has taken on the habit of sitting behind me while I plant myself at the foot of the grave. I sit at the foot of the grave and gingerly place the lavender I've held onto through all those harsh night on Outcast Island. The flower has just started to rot its petals. I can see a shade of a sickly green adorning the purple petals.

It's too quiet without her soft humming or hunter's feet. Several times I close my eyes and count to ten, hoping that when I open them, she'll have materialized without a sound as she often did. Nothing happens.

Early spring is in the air. The woods awakening from a long and harsh winter. A time of new beginnings my mother used to say. I want there to be a new start. But something inside me just can't let this go. And I don't force it.

How do you let someone go? How do you understand that that's alright? That everything changes. How do you find a way for that to make you feel good about life? Instead of breaking your heart?

I almost feel ashamed that someone could be that important to me. That without them, I feel like nothing. No one will ever understand how much it hurts. I feel hopeless, like nothing can save me.

I've been through so much in one lifetime.

But the hardest thing I've ever learned, is how to say goodbye.

Back at home, while toothless sleeps on his ember-covered bed, I throw open the skylights and doors letting the fresh spring air infect the entire house. Wanting to feel fresh and new for the season, I fill the tub with water, strip, and step into the tub; scrubbing old and dirty thing from me. My hair, my body, my mouth. Bright pink and tingly, I find something clean to wear in my clothes trunk.

It takes an hour to comb out my hair since it's matted into clumps. Then I feed the clothes I got from Outcast Island to the fire pit. As the clothes flare up, a burst of pure red flame envelops the clothes and devours them completely. I rush upstairs and pry open the trunk with Skullette's bow and arrow collection. There are only two bows and three sheaths of arrows. I don't remember the total she had before, but nonetheless, I gather a sheath, close the trunk, and open mine which has the cloth covered bow inside.

The sight of it brings back the memory of the cloth-covered Mulch who suffered a gruesome death. I shake the image from my mind and pull the bow free and unwrap it. It's a new one from the looks of it. I've never seen it with the rest of her collection. I sit on my bed. My fingers trace along the limbs, feeling the wood so smooth. Free of splinters.

The grip's made from bear hair and there are beautiful carvings in it. Such intricate designs. And right above the grip of the bow, is the Berk Crest. Completely hand carved and crafted. On the inside, under the grip, there are two letters carved. H&S.

Out of nowhere, tears begin to pour down my cheeks. I clutch the bow to my middle. I bring my knees to my chest, rocking the bow, crying. A new sound, part crying, part singing, comes out of my body, giving voice to my despair. And yet I feel relief flood me, prying at the icy silence.

After arming myself with the bow and arrows, I head out. I sling the bow over my shoulder since I have the slightest feeling I'm not going to use it. I make my way to the animal farm for a change and come to find Bucket free from his therapy. I see him milking a yak when his head jerks up and in my direction.

"Hey Hiccup." He says, and his voice almost has that same happy tone it used to. A closer look and he's lost that clouded, tortured look.

"Hey, Bucket." I start. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Lovely spring weather, don't you think?" he asks.

"I guess so."

I hear the door to the barn open and I see Logan, the man who's wedding was the talk of Berk, walk out.

"Hello Hiccup." He says.

"Hey, Logan. Nice to see you."

"You too. It's so good to see you out." He says, and the hint in his tone says he's being honest.

"So, how're things with the misses?" I ask.

"Great. Our new home is bigger and better than the old." He says, and I nod to signal I'm following. He must know the lingering question on my mind because he then says, "Jennifer and I decided to help take care of Bucket. We'll need the experience for when the baby comes."

It takes a few seconds for the news to sink in, and when it does, it explodes in my mind.

Jennifer's with child.

My eyes widen and my mouth drops. I do feel, excited, but I can't show it. So all I say is, "Congratulations."

It's all I have time to say before he smiles at me and takes Bucket inside. But before he shuts the door, he turns back and gives me a wave. This is the first good news I've been given since the execution. I can't fight the smile that crawls across my face, but it feels more like a grimace. Or one of Toothless' awkward smiles he usually gives me.

None of it matters, I'm happy for them. And that's what counts.

Toothless manages to find me and we fly to Skullette's grave. When we get there, someone has beaten us. We land and I hop off Toothless and rush to the grave. I come up short. Her cheeks slightly pink and her bangs dangle in her eyes like normal. She doesn't see me coming, so when she turns around, she jumps.

Astrid's not one to scare easily, so I can't help but find it a little amusing.

"You scared me." she says. She's frowning slightly as she takes me in.

"I see. What are you doing here?" I ask.

She stands up and I see a small pot in her hands. She brings it forward and says, "I went to the Cove and dug these up. I thought we could plant them around the grove and around your house."

She holds up a scraggly bush, and behind her that's when I see Bucket's wheelbarrow, filled with at least ten more. I'm about to question her why. All I see are rotted bushes with clods of dirt hanging from their roots. But before I get the chance to say anything, a breeze brushes the scent of the flower to my nose.

Lavender.

I blink several times in astonishment, and then look her in the eyes.

"For her."

I can't help but smile. Maybe in her own way, Astrid really did care about Skullette. I give her a nod of consent and she places the pot back on the ground. I help her dig the holes with my knife and she places the plants into the hole. Once we finish bordering the grave, we fly back home and continue the process until the bushes decorate the entire outline of my home and some windowsills.

Slowly, with many lost days, I come back to life. There are still days that I stay inside or visit her grave, some habits I can't break even if I tried. But if it helps me, then who is anyone to complain? I manage to find a way to go hunting again, I go with Bucket to collect fish and herd wild boars. The crack in the silence still lingering within me grows wider and wider.

I make more frequent trips to the Dragon Academy until one day, I finally walk through the gate into the arena. I check up on Logan and Jennifer's child. I fly with Dad. I sketch Toothless. Astrid and I grow back together.

One day, after the lavender flowers had bloomed, we had just finished a day of training at the Academy and headed into town. The dragons were due for a monthly dental checkup at Gobber's. As Meatlug was getting her teeth cleaned, Astrid pulled me aside.

We left the dragons and wandered into the woods, at the Cove. We didn't talk much, which seemed fine for the both of us. As we reach the water's edge, I crouch down, pick up a pebble in my hand, then after spinning it for a few seconds, I chuck it to the water.

It cleanly skips across the surface, leaving ripples that glow in the sunlight and blur the iridescent surface. Then plopping close to the middle.

"Hiccup," Astrid begins, and I stand up to meet her eyes.

She looks to me and they glow with a desperate longing. Suddenly she pours her heart out to me. Feelings that she's held back all those months ago while my heart was taken.

"I mean I know it's been hard for you, but I want you to know I'll always be there for you. If you'll have me, this'll be the last night you'll spend alone." I look away from her, but she takes my chin and turns my face to look at her. "Look me in the eye so I know you know. I'm everywhere you want me to be."

My eyes widen and my mouth agapes a little. She comes close to me, resting her head on my chest, where my heartbeat has increased in speed. "The last night you'll spend alone. I'll wrap you in my arms and I won't let go. I'm everything you need me to be."

I hesitate, but I place my hands on her back near her shoulder blade area. "The night is so long when everything's wrong. If you give me

your hand, give me the chance, I can help you hold on." She tells me.

I try to steady my breathing, and my hands make small circular motions on her back. There's no doubt in my mind she's serious. But can I really go back to her? Do I have the strength to let go?

"I won't let you say goodbye, Hiccup. And I'll be your reason why."

My lack of answers must have her troubled because she pulls away, looking me in the eye, "Unless you don't feel the same, and this is your way of trying to let me down easy, and I've made a spectacular fool of myself."

Her arms unwind from my neck and she steps back. Cramming fingers through her blonde hair, she doesn't look at me. "I've just made a fool of myself, haven't I?" she tries to smile.

"No."

"Yes, I have." She takes another step back. "What is it about you that makes rational behavior so difficult for me? Never mind. Forget I asked that."

Hurt and embarrassment are written all over her face, and I realize the only one being a fool is me.

She's offering me the one thing of beauty I can still claim as my own. I have to cling to it if I ever want to find my way back to the boy I used to be. And it isn't fair for me to deny her the truth just because I worry it means less coming from someone as broken as me.

I take her wrist and she stops backing away.

"I can do it again." The words are out before I give myself time to lose my nerve.

I don't know how to do this. Love is a piercing ache that refuses to slide into the silence. I'm grateful to hold onto something real, but I don't know how to make her see it. I mean to say something heartfelt and sincere like "give you my heart." Something that will erase her fears and leave us with one perfect moment in the midst of everything.

I look at her and realize I see something I never thought I'd see again.

Hope.

I'm broken, but not beaten. I want to live. Not just breathe in and out, watching one day fade into the next. I want to live.

The sun blazes a golden path through her blonde hair, and my eyes slide over her pinkish skin and come to rest on her lips. I pull her close. Trace the knuckles of my fingers along her smooth cheek. Slowly bringing both my hands to the nape of her neck. Warmth pools in my stomach and spreads lazily through me as I pull her closer.

I don't kiss her, but I lean our foreheads in. I take in her gracious

scent of citrus and midnight jasmine. All I see is Astrid, filling up my empty spaces and making me into something more than I ever could be on my own. Her breath catches, a tiny sound that makes me realize how close I'm standing to her.

"You said you'd save your heart for me." I whisper.

"I did." She declares, remembering with me the day she said she'd save her heart for me.

"I don't want to keep you waiting. But I'm just not ready." I say.

I can feel her body . . . relax, instead of tense up. I lean away and open my eyes, she opens hers and I can see the blue ocean in her eyes. I search her eyes, trying to register anger, hatred.

I find only relief.

"I'm so sorry." I say, tears filling my eyes. Astrid cradles my head in her hands. She brushes some hair out of my eyes.

"I said I'll wait for you. No matter how long it takes."

#### 41. Epilogue

I stare down at my feet, watching a fine layer of ash settle on the material. The bricks of the turret that used to be posted, now collapsed in a charred pile heap, helps provide a point of reference for the city. How else could I orient myself in this sea of gray?

Almost nothing remains of Outcast Island. The city is a carcass of ash and bone. Hollowed out. Every vestige of life burned into silence.

We understand each other.

Five years ago, an armada of dragons came and destroyed the entire city. Setting everything ablaze. Ending countless lives. While there are many reasons as to why, the one that stands out, is that it was my entire fault.

The magnitude of what I've done is a crushing weight I refuse to lift. Let it consume me. Let it drive me to my knees. It's less than I deserve.

I leave the rubble of the gate behind and walk the charred, twisted streets until I reach the ruins of Alvin's compound. The ashes cling to me as I sink down to sit where the bridge over the moat used to be.

But it's not just Outcast Island, it's Berk too. If I close my eyes, I can see Skullette, her green eyes shining with pride as I find my first target with a bow and arrow. Mulch with Bucket bringing me a cod only to find it already devoured by a Terrible Terror.

If I close my eyes, I'm still whole.

But I can't close my eyes. I don't dare. I need to see this. To

sear it into my brain so I never forget. When seeing isn't enough, I dig my fingers into the ash and let the silky texture cling to me like a scar I'll wear for the rest of my life.

We've given those who lost everything a new home. Though it's not enough. There have been talks about rebuilding elsewhere. But no one has returned except me. There's no life here now. The wind tugs gently at the ash I hold and it floats away like bits of silver.

\_Burning. Still burning.\_ I think numbly.

"Hiccup." I hear Astrid call. "It's almost time."

She's right. By noon, they will all be at my house back on Berk. The seamstresses, my father, Gobber, the village elder Goathy. I wonder if Bertha, the head seamstress will have made a whole new outfit for me.

A new Chief has to look his best.

Today's the day of my coronation.

I've been waiting for this day for years. At first, I wasn't even sure if I wanted this. I was leaning toward the idea that I could elect Chief Boggs as the new chief â€" he had decided to stay in Berk since he couldn't bear to go home. If anyone suffered possibly worse than I did, it had to be him. I can't imagine how one must feel over the loss of their only daughter. But I came awfully close.

I just wanted to take one last trip to Outcast Island. I don't know why. Maybe as a sort of motivation for me. To show me what the past has done, and promise a better future. I rise to my feet, but stand as motionless as the sight before me.

Afraid that one small move, and the dead will rise and pull me under.

I feel a meaty hand on my shoulder. I look and see my father's eyes. He gives me a weak smile. Finally I'm tall enough that I don't have to look up to see him. Now I can just turn my head and meet at his eye level. But thankfully I still have my own lean muscled body.

I take a deep breath, careful not to suck in any ash.

Then with one final glance back at the city, I lock arms with Astrid, and we fly back to Berk.

I'm immensely impressed with the work the seamstresses did. I leave behind my old clothes and change into the outfit.

A navy-blue tunic that reaches my knees with scale mail armor on it. Pale gray pants. A fur boot. My father's spiked gauntlets.

And finally, after there's some fidgeting and adjusting, my father comes forward with his fur cape and circular shoulder pads. He helps the seamstresses strap them on and secure them to my shoulders. Then everyone steps back to admire their work.

"My boy." My father says.

They turn me to show me my reflection in the shield.

I look different, but I'm still me. They never cease to amaze me. I look back at everyone, and Astrid comes forward with a freshly bloomed lavender.

"So she can see." She says. Then she pins it to my chest.

Toothless comes over and sniffs me. He grunts and cocks his head.

"It's still me bud." I say, and I touch his snout. Some things are timeless.

I take a deep breath as everyone files out to gather everyone in the Square. Once I'm the only one alone, I take one final tour of my old home. The rules state that the new chief will be moved into a new home, while his elder - my father - stays. Everything has already been moved into my new home. I'm going to miss this old place. I walk around brushing my fingers on everything that had meaning.

My old bed. My desk, that for once has been cleaned off of my sketches. Toothless' old rock bed. My closet stripped bare of any garments. I'm free to come visit anytime. My new home will literally be right across the Square. But I still mourn leaving this place. It holds too many memories.

I'm at the front door and I slide my hand up and down the wooden frame. I welcome any splinters that penetrate my skin. Something to hold onto. The fire pit has an abandoned look to it since there's nothing to cook. Or even a pot to cook anything in.

A new beginning. A new start.

My fingers graze over the metal knob on the door. Slowly coil around it. I look up at the living room. Take a deep breath. And I pull the door shut. I hear the latch lock from behind.

I stand there as motionless as the house. Very still.

"Hiccup?" I hear someone say.

I turn and see Astrid waiting with Dad. My eyes flick between the two. I softly smile, then walk down the stone steps, and interlocking arms with Astrid. Fresh spring flowers bloom at our feet as we make our way through the village. Catching an occasional cool breeze.

We gather at the coronation ceremony that's being held next to the Dragon Academy. They lifted the chain covering like at Thawfest. The tapestry from the wedding dangles from the cover. The chief's throne has been placed in the same spot where Dad watched me from the arena many years ago, back when we were killing dragons, and where he watched me nearly win the Thawfestival Games.

Dragons fly or stand with the Vikings as Dad takes the stage. I wait behind a wall of stone while he begins his speech. My eyes easily find Bucket. Spitelout. Ruffnut and Tuffnut. Snotlout. Fishlegs. I don't really pay attention, though I should be since I'll be making the speeches soon. But I spend the time replaying everything that's



happened in my life.

The good.

The bad.

The ugly.

And worse.

I clutch the lavender in my hand as I feel Dad's speech shift into saying how he's enjoyed being leader. It's coming.

My heart rate speeds up. Last minute tears stream down my cheeks as I desperately wish she'd be here. To watch me become chief. To see how I've pulled through the harshest times I've ever had to face.

I know she can't be with me. But hopefully, she and my mother are watching. And I'm hoping their proud.

I hear Dad wrap up his speech. My stomach churns. Gobber comes around the corner and like he did for when I was about to face a dragon, he says, "It's time Hiccup."

He must see the nervousness on my face, because he takes my icy hands in his warm ones. And we just stand there as Dad readies the crowd. The roar grows louder, and my nerves won't calm down. The roar of the crowd flashes me back to the day I invaded the city, set the entire thing ablaze. And watched her become part of the fire.

I'm suddenly shaking and breathing heavy, Gobber comes close and whispers calming words. My forehead is moist with sweat. Gobber rubs my back in comforting circular motions, and I try to calm my breathing.

"I don't know if I can do this." I say.

"You've been through worse." He counters. I look at him and he softly smiles.

That's as far as he can go without making me even more anxious. I pace back and forth as I try to calm myself down. Dad's already doing the introduction. I take deep breathes and after I level up with Gobber, we exchange a hug.

"Knock 'em dead." He says. His voice catches at the end and Gobber, whom I've never seen cry, has tears in his eyes.

I give him a pat on the shoulder and once Dad has the crowd riled up, I take a deep breath and step out into the open. The crowd goes wild and I take my spot next to Dad.

"Today, is the end of a legacy. But the start of a new one. Today, my boy becomes a leader. Today, he becomes the face of a new generation."

The crowd cheers as I'm guided by my father to the Chief's throne. I take my seat as my father reads the speech that's traditionally said for the crowning of a new heir. Goathy performs a blessing on me and ensures long life and prosperity. Then the time comes for the

official crowning.

Gobber comes forward with a new horned helmet. Apart from the spit and polish it's been given, I'd recognize it anywhere. It's the other half my mother's breastplate. The helmet that's part of a matching set. Gobber brings it forward on a velvet pillow, perfectly poised.

I place my hands on the arms rests and sit up straight, chin high.

My father takes the crown and says, "Let it be known on this day, I, Stoick the Vast, hereby declare you my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, as the new chief of Berk."

And with that, he places the helmet gracefully on my head.

The crowd goes wild. Wait a minute, there's an actual roar in the air. Everyone looks up and I see Toothless and the other dragons roaring in joy. I chuckle and smile. Toothless shoots a plasma blast into the air and it explodes in a beautiful blue ring of fire.

There's more roaring in the distance. The Whispering Death materializes from the clouds and behind it, a whole flock of dragons. Scauldron. Changewing. Typhoomerang. Timberjacks. Snaptrappers. Boneknappers. Skrills. Some hover in the air. Others stand on the ground, raising their necks and roaring and spewing fires for show.

Toothless hops up on the stage. He purrs and sniffs my helmet. My father and I chuckle, and then Dad levels with me and takes my fist and lifts it to the air. From the crowd, I hear Bucket cheer, "All hale the chief!"

After two solo rounds, soon the entire crowd joined in. "All hale the chief! All hale the chief! All hale the chief!"

My smile grows wider and into something genuine. I lift up my other arm and the chanting mixes with cheers. I look to my father, and he nods his head in consent. And with one final plasma blast from Toothless, the ceremony ends.

There's a celebratory dinner in the Great Hall along with magical music led by Gobber himself. By my request, they left the doors open to let the fresh spring air blow through the Hall. Sunlight illuminates the hall and the place is just glowing. There's laughing, singing, dancing. General merriment. As I wander through the crowd, faces appear, kisses are brushed on the cheek and people congratulate me.

The celebration was as big as the wedding we held for a lovely couple. The food's unworldly amazing, the music one of a kind. And all in all, I'm happy. And I'm looking forward for tomorrow. What the future will have for me now that I'm chief.

By late evening, the party has shifted outside to town's Square. Lanterns are strung around the border, there's a full moon out, and at least five tables of exquisite desserts. I wander through the crowd and see small peeks of my future.

A couple with a pregnant wife. A little girl playing with a baby Gronckle. Gobber and some other Viking men conversing by the fire pit. I get the same feeling of, happiness I had during Snoggletog and I saw everyone with their dragons while I was concerned about Toothless' ware bouts.

I wander through the crowd, looking for Astrid. I get sidetracked a number of times as people wish to talk to me about what I have planned for the future of Berk. By the time I find her, my cheeks hurt from smiling and I'm almost too tired to speak any longer.

I find her admiring a table of elaborately decorated cakes. When she sees me, she says, "I never knew Fishlegs was the baker kind."

"Well he does spend a lot of time studying the flora and the fauna. Nice to see what's it's really for." I reply. I pick a chocolate flower from a cake with my fingers and nibble on it, regardless of worrying about manners.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asks.

"Uh, about midnight." I reply. We exchange a look, and after I've sucked the rest of the flower frosting off my finger, I wipe it on a napkin, then take her by the hand saying, "Come on."

We walk with our fingers intertwined, through the woods until we reach the bed of flowers made by the Typhoomerang dragon. The flowers are a beautiful shade of blue, purple, and green. Even in the moonlight their colors are prominent.

Astrid walks through the flowers, taking small steps on her tiptoes. She looks like me when I was dancing around Toothless' dirt drawing years ago. I take the time to notice how she dressed for the occasion. Apart from her more exaggerated curves, she hasn't changed much.

Her blonde hair down and left naturally wavy. Her headband still in its usual place. A beautiful pearl colored dress with long sleeves and the slightest hint of blue that can only be seen in the moonlight. The sparkles when caught send a ripple of shimmer across her body. The collar's cut low to show off her collarbone and just enough to show her chest. But it still gives her that classy rather than sultry look to her.

The skirt spins out as she twirls and the moonlight catches it in ways that make her mythological. Entrancing. Beautiful.

She spins one more time and I know she's dizzy. She wobbles into my arms and we both laugh as I wrap a protective arm around her shoulder. We stay like this and I cup her head in my hands. My thumbs brush her cheeks, and I push her bangs out of her face. She gives a little innocent giggle and a sweet smile.

She places her hand on mine, so dainty and frail, and presses her cheek into my palm. "Hiccup," she starts. I watch her carefully. "Do you still love me?"

I'm easily taken off guard by her question. She looks to me and sees the surprise in my eyes. "Do you?" she repeats.

I want to give her an answer, but I can't shake the feeling there's something deeper about it. And I'm right.

Astrid gingerly traces the petals of the lavender still pinned to my tunic. She really wants to know if I've moved on. If I can love again and not feel guilty. Not feel the pain. I remember back to when we were still teenagers. And Astrid had said she'd save her heart for me.

The days that passed after the war with Alvin was over, I would visit her grave daily. Astrid still promised to save her heart for me. I never felt more, relieved in my life. To know I still have someone to love, to care about.

I turn and look over the horizon. "Skullette will always be my first love, nothing will change that." I start. I turn to Astrid in time to see her eyes fill with hurt and disappointment, but I quickly continue. "But lately, I've been thinking about, what I should do, and what will happen."

"I don't understand." Astrid says.

"I realize, I've been keeping you waiting too long, Astrid. And that's completely wrong of me to do so. And I realize, if she were here, or if she could say something to me, it'd be that she wants me to be happy."

Astrid's eyes lighten and glow.

"She'd wants me to move on. Yes, we were each other's first love. But things happen, and she would want nothing more than for me to be happy. Just like you would." Astrid smiles.

"We were more alike in more ways than one." She jokes.

This is right.

It has to be.

I know now that Astrid did care for Skullette. And she mourned for her in her own way. I knew there was a sign of hope when Astrid wanted to plant the lavender flowers.

This is right.

I step closer and I hold up my hands. Astrid holds out hands together, intertwining our finger, palms pressing together. I lean in, close my eyes and rest our foreheads together. The smell of lavender slowly becomes citrus and midnight jasmine.

The notion hurts me, but it comforts me quickly. A cool breeze blows past us, and multiple petals from the flowers ride the wind and circle around us. When the breeze dies down, the petals drift down in gentle motions, sprinkling both me and Astrid.

"I can't thank you enough, Astrid; for always being there for me. Even when I wasn't there for you." I step closer, the space between us decreases. "You are my light. You are my smile. You are my everything. You held my hand in the darkness. And pulled me out into

the light."

Her breath catches. I can feel the silence in me crack more and more with each word I say. "I never thought that I'd be able to love again. But seeing you, and knowing all that you've done, I know there's a God. And that he loved me enough, to take the time to create you."

The fissures in the icy silence grows. Astrid's breath plays across my cheeks. Warmth pools into my stomach.

"I love you, Astrid."

Her breath is a mixture of a gasp, a sob, and a laugh.

"You are my light. And it doesn't matter what happens in this life as long as you're with me. I love you. And that is past my mind. Beyond my heart. I love you from my soul. And the space where only you and Thor dwell."

I look and see Astrid, not really crying, but a few stray tears roll down her cheeks. She takes one step in, and she rests her head on my chest. I wrap my arms around her waist, tug her close, and kiss her lips. The kiss was rough, maybe harsh. But through it all, I taste the longing I've wanted to unleash the minute Skullette passed. It was so heated. And in it, we both unleash every single emotion we've been holding back.

She wraps her arms around my neck and tangles her fingers in my hair. I feel something stir deep inside me. It grows warmer and spreads out from my chest, down through my body, out along my arms and legs, to the tips of my being.

This is the first time I've ever felt true hope. The silence in me shatters. Everything I've ever held back swarms inside me and I let them find their way to my mouth where Astrid's warm lips and comfort can devour them.

I feel the presence of the boy who I thought was forever lost.

And I feel the empty pieces of my shattered life, finally fall back into place.

The End.

End  
file.